SCREECH IN LOVE

SAVED by the BELL

#21

How far will Screech go for love?

Beth Cruise

SCREECH IN LOVE

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by Beth Cruise

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To Screech and all his goofiness

Chapter 1

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Zack Morris strolled through the swinging doors of the Max, the burger bistro he and his friends considered their second home, and paused to look around. There was a new poster on the wall advertising the Maxi-Yum, a sundae made of seven different scoops of ice cream topped with four sauces, a mountain of whipped cream, nuts, and the small plastic figure of a mountain climber planting a flag in the center of a maraschino cherry. The full-color picture of the sundae made it look tempting. But the price was beyond the cash currently residing in his wallet.

Of course, he could always talk someone else into

sharing both the ice cream and the bill with him. Preferably the most gorgeous girl at Bayside who, he knew, had a very small appetite.

Zack scanned the Max again, this time zeroing in on the long, shiny, dark brown hair of the girl of his dreams.

"Kelly!" Zack called, and headed for the booth Kelly Kapowski was sharing with Jessie Spano. The girls had their heads together and a magazine open on the table before them.

"Hi, Zack!" Kelly greeted happily. She gave him a special smile.

But then, since she had agreed to go steady with him again, all Kelly's smiles seemed special to Zack.

He slipped into the seat across from the girls and wasted no time. "Care to go dutch on a—"

Kelly cut him off before he could finish. "Wish I could, but my hours got cut at Yogurt 4-U, so I can't afford to buy anything."

"Oh." Far from fazed, Zack turned to Jessie. "How about—"

"No," she said.

"But you don't even know what I was going to suggest," Zack sputtered.

"It doesn't matter. I can't eat at a time like this," Jessie insisted. "I've got a tough decision to make."

So did he, once he found someone to chip in on

the cost of the mountain of ice cream. Like what seven flavors to choose and whether to stick with hot fudge, pineapple, marshmallow, and caramel sauces or try the bubblegum, raspberry, pomegranate, and mango instead.

"Maybe you can help me, Zack," Jessie said, and turned the magazine around so that it faced him. "Do you think I'd look better in this or this?"

She stabbed her finger first at one picture, then flipped quickly to another page and pointed to a second photograph. Both were of long floral dresses in soft colors. As far as Zack could tell, the only difference was that one was light blue with white flowers and one was green with white flowers.

"Uh . . . ," he stalled.

"You see, I think azure would be more traditional, but since my eyes are hazel, there are flecks of green in them and the lime might be the better choice," Jessie said.

"Of course," Kelly added, "there is this other dress." She leafed through the magazine, flipping the pages so fast Zack wondered how she could find anything. Especially since she was looking at the magazine upside down. "This shade of coral would look great with your skin tone . . ."

Zack tuned out. Since Jessie didn't usually fret about her clothes, he figured something big must

have come up. And the only thing *big* in the wind was the Paper Moon Dance.

Sponsored by the Alpha Beta Delta sorority, the most exclusive girls' club at Bayside High, the dance was *the* social event of the school year and cost mega bucks to attend. The Alpha Deltas also insisted on formal attire, making it one very expensive evening.

If Zack remembered correctly, Binky Grayson had been hanging around Jessie's locker lately. Binky was the only Bayside student to have his lunch catered every day. But Jessie was not the kind of girl who was impressed by money. If Binky had asked her to the Paper Moon Dance, she was probably going because she wanted the wealthy Grayson family to contribute to one of her many environmental projects.

"So what do you think, Zack?" Jessie asked, recalling him to the impossible task of choosing a dress. What did he know about girls' clothing?

"I think you need to ask Lisa's opinion," he said, taking the easy way out. Lisa Turtle lived and breathed fashion.

Jessie sighed. "I already did, and all she wanted to know was what Mom was planning to wear."

"Your mother is going to the Paper Moon Dance?" Zack asked, dumbfounded.

"No! What are you talking about? I'm trying to

find a dress to wear for my mother's wedding. I'm the maid of honor, remember?"

He remembered all right. For a full week after the Save the Beach festival where he and the gang had helped keep Smuggler's Cove public, the girls had talked of nothing but Kate Spano's surprise engagement. The bridegroom-to-be was a well-known lawyer whose work Jessie had admired, so she was thrilled to have him for a stepfather.

That was a pleasant switch as far as her friends were concerned. Jessie had gotten them involved in some pretty weird situations in the past. She hadn't been pleased when her father remarried, and she had even suspected her mother's previous boyfriend of being a criminal.

But to have Jessie worried about what to wear was like seeing her sprout antennae on her head.

"So you aren't going to the Paper Moon Dance with Binky Grayson?" Zack asked, just to be sure.

"Binky Grayson?" Kelly echoed confusedly.

Jessie shivered with distaste. "No way. He's creepy, five inches shorter than I am, and smells of fish."

"That's probably the caviar he has for lunch every day," Kelly said.

"Ugh. Fish eggs," Zack mumbled under his breath, and shivered theatrically. How could anybody choose caviar over a burger?

Or a Maxi-Yum.

Since he was still missing a sucker to go halves with him on the sundae, Zack scanned the restaurant for another victim. A moment later A. C. Slater, captain of the football team and Bayside's own state championship wrestler, swung through the door.

Hmm. Bad choice. Slater's appetite was as big as his own, Zack knew.

Samuel "Screech" Powers was right on Slater's heels. Zack considered his geeky friend and crossed him off the list as well. Although Screech was super skinny, he could eat as much as the whole soccer team, then ask what was for dessert.

No, to make this a worthy scam, he needed a girl who would want nothing more than a taste of ice cream rather than pig out and risk destroying her figure.

Lisa Turtle bowled through the Max's double doors and nearly knocked Slater and Screech down in her rush to get to the gang's usual booth.

Zack's smile widened with pleasure. "Whoa! What's the hurry?" he asked, making room for her on the bench next to him.

"Awesome news," Lisa gasped. "Guess who's playing at the Paper Moon Dance?"

"Same group as always, I guess," Slater said. He and Screech pulled chairs up to the table. "Has

Bayside ever had a dance where Trish Yardley and the Slickers didn't play?"

"Well, Trish is out of a job this time," Lisa said. "Babs Lindenburg just told me that her father—he's a talent agent, you know—booked the hottest new rock group around for the bash."

Screech stared at her, his eyes nearly bugging out. "You mean—"

"Yes!" Lisa shouted. "Occupational Haze!"

"You're kidding!" Jessie gasped.

"Girlfriend, I don't kid about things like this," Lisa insisted. "There is no way any of us are going to miss this dance."

Kelly slumped back in her seat. "There sure is. It's too expensive for some of us to attend, Lisa. The tickets alone are—"

"Going fast," Lisa interrupted. "The dance is two weeks away. All we have to do is pool our money and snap up enough tickets before they are gone. Then we can sort out who owes who what later." She emptied her purse onto the table.

Zack caught a lipstick that rolled his way before it fell off the edge of the table.

"I've got . . . hmm . . . three dollars and seventy-two cents," Lisa announced.

Zack dropped his total net worth on the table. "Two-eighty-six."

Slater dug in his pocket. "Ninety-seven cents."

"You're richer than I am," Jessie said, and contributed seventy-three cents.

"Or I am," Kelly added, and slid a quarter and three dimes into the pile.

Screech turned the pockets of his checked slacks inside out, then the pockets of his Hawaiian-print shirt. "Ah!" he sighed with satisfaction, and slapped a coin down. "That should help," he said.

Slater picked Screech's contribution up and examined it. "Not much, though. This is a peso, Screech. Do you know how many pesos it takes to equal just one American dollar?"

"Nearly a ton," Lisa said. "Believe me, sweetie, I've shopped in Mexico. I know."

"We've got a total of eight dollars and eighty-three cents, not counting the peso," Jessie announced. "Far from the cost of one ticket, much less six."

"Seven," Lisa corrected. "I couldn't go without Keith, could I?" Lisa had been dating Keith Bockman for a number of weeks now.

"Eight," Slater said. "With Occupational Haze playing, I don't think I'll have any trouble finding a date for this dance."

"As if you ever did," Lisa murmured.

"Make that nine tickets," Jessie said, her teeth clenched together in a phony smile. There was no

way she was going to the dance without a date if Slater was bringing another girl. There were times when she thought they were close to getting back together. Then the Neanderthal would do something stupid again, like decide to ask another girl out.

Kelly sighed. "So we need an even ten if you want to bring a date, Screech."

"Can I?" he asked, a bit stunned at the news. "Who?"

"Don't worry, Screech," Lisa advised. "Once we've got tickets, I don't think you'll have any trouble finding a date."

"Yeah, but we're a long way from buying even one ticket, much less ten," Slater said. "It's a good thing that Zack and Kelly will be going together, or we'd really be in trouble."

"We aren't now?" Jessie asked.

Kelly sighed. "Boy, are we ever. Tickets are ten dollars each. That's one hundred dollars we've got to come up with."

"Not to mention things to wear," Lisa murmured. She dropped her head in her hands and stared at the small mound of cash in the center of the table. "I don't know how we'll ever come up with enough. I'm in mega trouble with my parents. They went sorta ballistic when they got the credit card bill this month. I would use my savings account, but I

think the current balance is about five bucks."

"Don't look at me," Slater recommended. "I had unexpected repairs on my pickup truck. Contributing to this"—he waved a hand at the small horde of bills and coins—"cleaned me out."

"Sorry," Kelly said, "but I'm only dishing out yogurt eight hours a week right now. It was either take a cut in hours or find another job."

Everyone swiveled to look at Jessie. She sighed deeply. "I can't ask Mom to increase my allowance now with all the expenses of the wedding coming up. Besides, I found this great deal on a new computer program that helps improve school essays and . . . well, my essays are great but I'm broke."

"How about you, Screech?" Zack asked.

Screech's mobile face assumed a look of total devastation. He sighed deeply. "Investments in parts for my inventions," he said. "I knew I shouldn't have dipped into my emergency fund, but I did it anyway. All with an eye to the future. Little did I know the future would arrive so quickly."

"So all you've got is this peso?" Slater asked, tossing the foreign coin back to Screech.

Overbalancing as he tried to catch it, Screech cried, "Yeeesssss!" and fell out of his chair.

While Screech picked himself up, everyone stared at Zack.

He gave them his most charming smile.

"Well, Zack?" Jessie demanded.

Her look made him feel as if he were being questioned under a hot spotlight. Zack swallowed loudly.

"Do you have enough money to buy the tickets?" she asked.

"And new dresses," Lisa added.

"And to rent tuxedos," Slater reminded.

Zack swallowed again. "Scuba diving," he said.

"Scuba diving?" Kelly repeated.

"Yeah. Dad has a new client who runs a scuba diving school. You see, he was interested in a software program that—"

"Morris?" Slater growled. "What exactly are you trying to tell us?"

"Uh, that I decided to sign up for lessons?" Zack suggested. "I had to borrow from my parents, against my allowance, so I'm more or less bankrupt."

"More or less?"

"Well, maybe more than less," Zack confessed.

"Good-bye Paper Moon Dance," Lisa said sadly.

"Farewell Occupational Haze," Kelly murmured.

"Oh, it isn't all bad," Zack insisted. He scooped up the money and signaled to a waitress. "We've got enough cash here to console ourselves. One Maxi-Yum sundae and six spoons, please," he ordered. "Now, what flavors should we get?"

Chapter 2

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"Hi, Zack," Babs Lindenburg said the next day as she paused by Zack's locker.

She was wearing a giant button that read: *I'm in an Occupational Haze. Are you?* Every member of the Alpha Beta Delta sorority was wearing one to school that day. Some even wore two!

"You know," Babs murmured flirtatiously, "if you weren't going steady with Kelly, I'd ask you to be my date for the Paper Moon Dance. As head of the entertainment committee I not only have two tickets, I get to spend time with the band backstage."

She pouted prettily and ran one finger down

Zack's chest. "Are you sure this thing with Kelly is true love?"

Before Zack could answer, Kelly slid between him and Babs. "He's sure," Kelly growled.

"Too bad," Babs said, and walked away slowly, glancing back over her shoulder at Zack. "If you change your mind, Zackie, you will let me know, won't you?"

Kelly's elbow jabbed Zack in the ribs.

"I won't change my mind," he called after Babs.

Kelly didn't look convinced of his sincerity.

"If I can't go with you, I don't want to go with anyone," Zack assured her.

"Yeah, sure," Kelly muttered. "I think I've heard that one before."

"Only in the past. I'm reformed, remember?"

Kelly regarded him quietly. "I'm not sure you can totally reform. And maybe I don't want you to totally stop being the old Zack, either. Hey, I did fall in love with the guy, didn't I?"

Zack breathed a sigh of relief, then realized that he wasn't entirely off the hook yet. Kelly was staring down the hall in the direction that Babs had disappeared.

"If we weren't going steady again, would you have gone to the dance with Babs?" she asked.

"Not a chance," Zack lied quickly.

Kelly turned her beautiful, suspicious blue eyes on him. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Zack searched his mind for a reason. "Uh, well, I have nothing in common with her. Even alphabetically we're at opposite ends of the, er, alphabet."

"No, you're not. First names are never used for alphabetical order. In fact," Kelly said, warming to the theme, "Lindenburg is closer to Morris than Kapowski is, so she comes between us."

"No one could ever come between us," Zack vowed.

But Kelly wasn't done. "What about that girl in New York City?"

"Alex? She didn't come between us. It was just that without her help we couldn't have—"

"Or Star Cavein?"

"Craven," Zack corrected, and earned a glare for his trouble. "That was a job. Could I help it if—"

"Wasn't there a cowgirl in New Mexico, Tawdry something."

"Tawnee Jo?"

Kelly's eyes narrowed. "Not to forget Brandi and Clorinda and—"

Since being on the defense was only wedging his foot deeper in his mouth, Zack switched to offense. "What about you and Mitch Tobias?"

Kelly's chin rose. "You know very well that we're just friends. Can I help it that he's a famous movie star now?"

"Then what about—"

Kelly crossed her arms over her chest. "We aren't talking about me, Zack Morris. We're talking about whether you would have gone to the dance with Babs if you hadn't asked me to go steady with you first."

"But—"

Kelly's foot began to tap. "I'm waiting," she said.

Before he could answer, the bell rang for classes.

Kelly gathered up her books. "I'll expect an answer when I see you at lunch," she told him, and turned away with a toss of her long hair.

Zack smacked his head against the door to his locker a couple times and wondered how he managed to get into this kind of spot. All he'd been doing was minding his own business when Babs came by and—

Slater rushed down the hall and buffeted into Zack, nearly pushing him flat against the locker. "Preppie! I've got the solution to our problems. Meet me in the parking lot at lunch and I'll explain everything. Gotta go." The last words were thrown back, rather like a football pass, as Slater trotted toward his first class.

Zack shook his head, trying to clear it. He was supposed to concoct a believable story to soothe

Kelly's feelings by lunch. He was supposed to meet Slater for a mysterious meeting at lunch.

Behind him, someone cleared their throat. "Uh, Morris? Isn't there someplace you're supposed to be?" Mr. Belding, the school principal, asked. "Of course, if you'd rather skip first period, I can always make an exception for you. We could talk about it at lunch."

"Lunch? Couldn't do it, sir," Zack said, grabbing his books and slamming his locker closed. "I'm booked solid today. Maybe another time?"

"Then I suggest you make good use of that letter in track, Zack," Mr. Belding said. "You've got thirty seconds to get to class or . . ."

Zack never heard the rest. He was too busy breaking the school record for the last-minute dash.

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Slater and Screech were both in the parking lot, leaning against Slater's truck, when Zack arrived at noon.

"Make it fast," Zack said. "I've got apologies to make to Kelly in a few minutes."

Slater grinned. The dimples in his cheeks deepened to the size of craters. "What did you do this time?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, which only means I have to outdo myself on the apology," Zack said. "Of course, if you've got good news for me, that might help."

"Oh, it's good news," Slater assured Zack as he swung up onto the hood of his truck and got comfortable. "Tell him about your latest project, Einstein."

Zack turned his full attention to Screech. "A new invention? What's it do?"

"In layman's terms?" Screech asked. "Well, I guess you could say the inner combustion is controlled by a magnetic field, which in turn—"

"It cuts grass," Slater said, getting to the heart of the matter.

"Well, yeah," Screech agreed. "Didn't I say that?"

"No," Zack said. "What's so great about inventing a lawn mower? No offense, Screech, but the things have been around for years."

"Not one like this," Slater insisted. "With this lawn mower all you have to do is sit back and drink lemonade in the shade. It's remote controlled."

"All right!" Zack slapped Screech on the shoulder by way of congratulations and nearly knocked his friend flat on his face.

"And that's not all," Slater said. "Tell Zack about your other invention."

Screech blushed modestly. "Oh, it isn't much. Just something I tinker with and—"

"He's invented a robot that trims hedges," Slater explained.

"Does it work?" Zack demanded.

"Certainly it works," Screech declared stoutly. "Elias did an excellent job on my grandmother's shrubs just this past weekend. He's into topiary and shaped one to look just like Grandma's favorite poodle. Complete," he added with a wink, "with a very smart bow on its tail."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, preppie?" Slater asked.

"You mean about how convenient it is that you have this sturdy truck for transporting things like gardening equipment?" Zack asked.

"Not to mention that silver tongue of yours that can talk anybody into shelling out money for a service such as . . ."

"Exterior landscape grooming?" Zack suggested.

"Maximum income with minimum toil thanks to our friend Screech," Slater said, and clasped Screech on the shoulder in appreciation.

Screech's knees buckled. Zack caught him before he took a nosedive.

"So, when do we start?" Slater asked.

"The sooner the better, wouldn't you say, Screech?" Zack said.

"Start what?" Screech demanded, blinking at them both in surprise.

"Our very own lawn service. You can be the executive vice president in charge of, oh, what would you call it, Slater?" Zack asked. "Mechanical, er . . . ?"

"Mechanical manipulation," Slater said.

"Nice," Zack murmured with a nod. "It means you are completely in charge of running all the machinery, Screech."

"I am?"

"Hey, it's the least we could do for you, considering you invented these things," Zack insisted, the picture of sincerity. "And Slater can be vice president in charge of transportation."

"And what is your position in this company?" Slater demanded. "President and chairman of the board?"

Zack beamed happily. "Why, thank you!" he said. "While it is true that all top management does tend to rise from a background in sales, I didn't want to be pushy and steal the highest level from either of you. But since you insist—"

"Zack Morris!"

Zack cringed at the sound of Kelly's raised voice. He recovered quickly and rushed across the school lawn to where she stood, hands on her hips and a frown on her face.

Before she could say a word more, he swept her into his arms and swung her around. "Have I ever got news for you!" he said. "We're going to the Paper Moon Dance."

"We are?" She stared at him a moment, then jumped up and down in excitement before hugging him tightly. "I can't believe it! How?"

"How? How else?" Zack demanded. "I'm going to work!"

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Lisa and Kelly squeezed into Jessie's car after school. There didn't seem to be much of a reason to go to the Max, since the guys were off drumming up lawn work and they were all broke anyway.

"Where to?" Jessie asked.

Lisa and Kelly looked at each other. "The mall," they said in unison.

Jessie put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot.

They had barely gone a block when Kelly sighed. "You know, I feel a bit guilty about letting Zack come up with money for the tickets, his tuxedo, *and* a dress for me. It doesn't seem fair."

"It doesn't?" Lisa asked, clearly dumbfounded. "But if you keep going steady with him and then move on to being pre-engaged, engaged, and finally married to him, he'll be paying for everything, anyway. Why not get used to it now?"

"But it won't be that way," Kelly insisted. "I'm going to have a career and contribute to the finances, too. What do you think, Jessie?"

"I agree with Kelly. I think we should be doing something to help out. I mean, if I've got to find a date, it doesn't seem fair for me not to foot the bill myself," Jessie said.

"I, for one, would like to kick Slater," Lisa declared. "Imagine! He sat right there and basically told you he didn't want to go to the dance with you, Jessie. I always thought you were wrong about him being a Neanderthal, but now I have to say I agree. He really is an inconsiderate jerk of a caveman!"

Jessie shrugged. "It isn't as if we're going together anymore."

"Stop being so noble," Lisa insisted. "We all know that you're still nuts about him."

"That's only because my prince charming hasn't shown up yet," Jessie said with a laugh. "As soon as he rides into sight, I'll forget I was ever interested in A. C. Slater."

"Sure you will," Kelly said. "The same day the weather report calls for a blizzard in Palisades."

"I'm not that bad," Jessie insisted. She kept her eyes on the road so that her friends wouldn't see she had doubts about it herself.

"Well, either way, I still feel uncomfortable letting the guys pay for everything," Kelly said. "Did you talk to Keith about buying tickets?"

Lisa nodded slowly. "And it was just more bad

news. He'd love to see Occupational Haze, too, but all the travel he's done lately, checking into tennis scholarships at various universities, has drained his pocket. It looks like the only way any of us will be going to the dance is with the money Screech's robot makes."

"Do you really think it works?" Jessie asked.

"Hey, the geek is weird but he's smart weird," Lisa said.

"I know Zack insists that he'll have enough money for me to buy a new dress, but I want to pay for it myself," Kelly declared.

"You could always wear one of your other dresses," Jessie suggested.

Lisa stared at her in shock. "Get real, girl!"

"Or I could look for another job while we're at the mall," Kelly said.

"All of us could," Jessie suggested. "Let's face it. The guys have come up with brilliant plans before that didn't work out as they should."

"True," Lisa murmured.

"And it would really show them that we're just as capable of making money as they are."

"Not to mention just as noble in buying dance tickets . . . ," Kelly said.

". . . and corsages," Lisa added.

". . . and paying for tux rentals . . ."

". . . and boutonnieres . . ."

". . . and dresses . . ."

". . . and limousines," Lisa said.

Jessie and Kelly turned to stare at her. "*Limousines?*" they repeated.

Lisa nodded. "It is the Alpha Beta Delta dance," she reminded them. "I'll bet Babs shows up in a cream-colored limo."

"You know," Kelly murmured thoughtfully, "I'll just bet she does." But, she added quietly to herself in satisfaction, it would not be with Zack Morris.

Chapter 3

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The next morning Kelly discovered a way for the girls to make money, too.

Mr. and Mrs. Kapowski were running late to work, so Kelly volunteered to walk her little brother Billy to his preschool, the Happy Pumpkin Cottage. The day care center was right on her way to school, so it was no trouble and it gave her a chance to spend time alone with Billy. Considering that she had three older brothers and two younger sisters, plus Billy, moments for quality time with any one of her siblings tended to be rare.

"Good morning, little pumpkin," a woman greeted Billy as he rushed into the cottage, eager to play with his friends. The boy gave her a big grin as he fell against her legs and hugged her knees. Then he was gone, hurrying toward the sounds of playing children in another room.

"Hi, Mrs. Peters," Kelly said. "How are you doing today?"

"Oh, Kelly. It's so nice to see you," the day care owner greeted her. "Other than being at my wit's end, I suppose I'm fine."

"Why? What's wrong?" Kelly asked. "You look a bit stressed out."

"Only a bit?" Mrs. Peters murmured. "I've been swamped since three of my afternoon helpers came down with the flu. They can't come back to work until they are one hundred percent better, and being shorthanded is wearing me out."

"That's terrible! I hope you're taking lots of vitamins so you don't get sick," Kelly said.

"More every day." The woman paused, considering Kelly a moment. "You wouldn't be interested in a temporary job, would you?"

"Well, sure. Except, I've got school," Kelly told her.

"You're so good with the little ones," Mrs. Peters said, "and I'm so worn out by lunch, I was hoping I could tempt you to at least put in some time here

after school. Bayside lets out just about when nap time is over. It would only be until my regular staff members are healthy once more."

Kelly nearly jumped up and down in excitement, but she controlled herself. She'd been interviewing with employers long enough now to know not to get her hopes up until she knew all the facts. Instead, she chewed her lip as if considering the job offer. "How long do you think you'd need me?" she asked.

Mrs. Peters counted quickly on her fingers. "Today is Wednesday, and the ladies will be out all of next week, so shall we say ten days tops?"

"Ten days?"

"Eight," Mrs. Peters offered, bargaining. "And because I'm desperate, I'll double what I usually pay my teenage assistants."

"Double?" Kelly had to stop herself from dancing, she was so thrilled.

"Paid daily rather than at the end of the week," the day care director said. "Uh, do you think you could start today?"

Kelly held out her hand. "Absolutely."

Mrs. Peters heaved a giant sigh of relief and shook Kelly's hand gratefully. "Now if only I had more happy pumpkins with teenage sisters like you, I might make it through the crisis," she said.

"More helpers? Do they have to be experienced?"

"At this point, I'm willing to do on-the-job training," Mrs. Peters said.

A slow grin curved Kelly's lips. "I think I know just where to find a couple of amateurs."

"You are an angel," the director insisted.

Kelly wondered if Jessie and Lisa would think so.

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Mr. Belding looked up when he heard a tap at his office door. "Come in," he called, then looked surprised to see his visitor. "Zack. Don't tell me I'm late for one of those special detention halls that you and I share so frequently."

Zack sauntered into the room, a clipboard in hand, and made himself at home in the chair across from the principal's desk. He had sat in it so often over the last four years that it seemed as if it were *his* chair.

"No, sir," Zack said. "Although since we haven't had any quality time together in more than a week, I thought I'd stop by to see how you're doing."

"Did you now," Mr. Belding murmured suspiciously. He'd been taken in by a lot of Zack's scams in the past and was on his guard not to get suckered again.

"I was just mentioning to Mrs. Pinkney yesterday that—," Zack began.

Mr. Belding cut him off. "Mrs. Pinkney? Not Mrs. Muriel Pinkney?"

"Yeah. Who else? Anyway, I was telling her that—"

"*The* Mrs. Muriel Pinkney who lives three houses down from my home?" Mr. Belding demanded.

"There's more than one Mrs. Muriel Pinkney?" Zack asked, acting stunned at the news.

"No. I mean, yes, there may be, but I'm only interested in the Muriel Pinkney who lives in my neighborhood," Mr. Belding hastily explained.

"Nice lady," Zack told him. "And I told her that—"

"What were you doing talking to Mrs. Pinkney?" Mr. Belding asked sharply. He sounded a little on edge, Zack thought.

"As I've been trying to tell you, we were commenting on how nice your yard looks," Zack said. "But Mrs. Pinkney thought you could use some help with little things like the lawn and the hedges. I got the impression that she thought you spend too much time on your flower beds and not enough on doing the trivial but oh-so-necessary things like hedge trimming and lawn mowing."

Mr. Belding looked thoughtful. "She would say that," he mumbled beneath his breath before explaining to Zack. "Mrs. Pinkney is an avid gardener, and she hasn't forgiven me for beating her at the recent Palisades Horticulturist Fair. My petunias took first prize and hers came in second."

Zack beamed. "Congratulations, sir. I had no idea I was in the presence of a master gardener."

"Oh, well, I wouldn't exactly call myself that," Mr. Belding said modestly, relaxing back in his chair. "But I will say it is hard to find finer petunias than those in my yard."

"I'll bet you'd like to spend far more time caring for your flowers, wouldn't you, sir?" Zack said.

"Naturally it would be great to do so, however—" Mr. Belding broke off. His chair snapped into an upright position again as he leaned forward to face Zack. "Why are you so interested in my petunias, Morris?"

Zack smiled broadly. "Funny you should ask that," he said, and fished a business card from the pocket of his shirt. "From what you've told me, it sounds as if you need to find a little extra time. And that is what we at M. S. and P. offer our customers."

The principal took the card and looked at it. "Morris, Slater, and Powers. Let us take your yard into the twenty-first century," he read.

"We mow lawns and trim hedges," Zack declared proudly, "taking away the tedium of yard work and leaving you the fun part. If you are wondering about the quality of our work, you can check with Mrs. Pinkney. She was our very first customer yesterday."

"Mrs. Pinkney trusted you?"

"She told us she'd never seen a more professional job," Zack assured.

"The picky Mrs. Pinkney actually let you and Slater and Screech touch her yard?" Mr. Belding demanded in disbelief.

"Is there a reason that she wouldn't?" Zack asked.

"Had she ever met you before?" Mr. Belding asked.

"No," Zack lied. She was actually a friend of Screech's grandmother, but Mr. Belding didn't need to know that.

The principal leaned back with a sigh. "That explains it. How much damage did you do?"

Zack assumed a hurt look. "I'm offended. How can you ask such a thing?"

"Personal experience," Mr. Belding said.

Zack sighed deeply and started to get to his feet. "I suppose that means that you aren't interested in hiring us to do your—"

Mr. Belding tapped the business card against his desktop. "I didn't say that, Morris. You say Mrs. Pinkney was happy with your work?"

"She praised Screech in particular," Zack said.

Mr. Belding shook his head in wonder. "Well, the fact is, I could use some help, Zack. And considering how finicky Mrs. Pinkney is, I have to admit you couldn't find a better reference than she."

Zack sank back into the chair, fished a pencil from his pocket, and held it in readiness over his clipboard. "I think we can fit you in around four o'clock this afternoon, sir. Now, just exactly what would you like M. S. and P. to handle for you?"

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As Zack was leaving Mr. Belding's office, Jessie, Kelly, and Lisa were sitting in Jessie's car staring at the front door of the day care center.

"It's easy," Kelly insisted for what she felt was the hundredth time. "All you have to do is play with them. I know you can do that."

"What if—," Jessie began.

"There won't be any what ifs," Kelly said. "Mrs. Peters will handle any emergencies. Now, just tell me which group you'd prefer to take care of. There are the darling babies and one-year-olds, the two-year-olds, and the three-year-olds. Mrs. Peters says she can handle the kids four and older if we keep the younger ones entertained."

Lisa looked thoughtful. "Babies mean diapers to change, don't they?"

"Sometimes," Kelly admitted. "But they are so adorable and cuddly and—"

"I'll take the three-year-olds," Lisa said.

"—you know," Kelly continued, "there is a special smell that babies have—"

"Smell?" Jessie made a face. "I'll take the two-year-olds," she announced hastily.

"—that is really neat," Kelly finished. She looked at her friends and shook her head sadly. "You both look scared. Haven't you ever baby-sat?"

"For this many kids? No way," Lisa said. "I did stay with the neighbor's kids once, but they are older and were happy as long as I didn't tell them when to go to bed and let them pig out on pizza and video games."

"Well, we won't have pizza or video games at the Happy Pumpkin Cottage," Kelly said, "but if you just talk to your little pumpkins, I'm sure you'll find a way to entertain them. Besides, this is the perfect solution to our problem. We'll make loads of money in just eight days."

Jessie didn't look enthusiastic. "I suppose so," she said.

"And it's only for a couple of hours each day after school," Kelly pointed out. "The weekend is still free to look for outfits for the dance."

"True," Lisa mumbled. She took a deep breath and opened the car door. "Okay. Let's do it."

When they walked in, Mrs. Peters hugged Kelly; she was so thrilled to have help with the children. Waving Kelly off to the room where the infants were, the day care director took Jessie and Lisa to the large

backyard where a dozen little voices were raised in happy squeals. Tiny little people were everywhere, or so it seemed to Jessie and Lisa. They were busy filling pails in the sandbox, climbing over a jungle gym, sliding down a slide, swinging on swings, or just running wildly around the yard having fun.

The noise was incredible—the sound seemed louder than that of screaming fans at Bayside sporting events.

Mrs. Peters didn't seem to notice the volume. She took a whistle from her pocket and blew two shrill blasts on it. Within a moment, all noise and activity had stopped and the little tykes all stared at the director.

"Come over here, all of you," she called happily. "I want you to meet some very nice ladies."

The little people moved closer.

"These ladies have come to play with you until Miss Bannister and Miss Mason can come back," Mrs. Peters announced.

The children stared. Not one, not even Billy Kapowski, who knew Jessie and Lisa, said a word.

"Now, I'd like all the members of the Two Club to get on this side of the yard and the Threes on the other side. No, Flavia, you belong with the Twos, not the Threes."

"I'm free," the little blond-haired girl insisted, holding up three chubby fingers.

"Not until your birthday next week," Mrs. Peters said. "Remember, we're going to have a party when you graduate to being a Three. Now, be a good girl and behave."

Sullenly, Flavia shuffled her feet and hung her head.

"I don't want you giving Jessie any trouble," Mrs. Peters insisted sternly.

Flavia sniffed but didn't answer. Mrs. Peters gave Jessie and Lisa both a smile. "You'll do fine," she assured them.

Feeling far more panicked than assured, Jessie looked at Lisa.

But her friend was far from sympathetic. "Think about being in the same room with Occupational Haze," Lisa suggested under her breath. "I sure am."

Jessie took a deep breath. "Occupational Haze, Occupational Haze," she murmured to herself.

Flavia looked up at her, her head tilted at a bird-like angle. "You're big," the little girl said.

"Tall," Jessie corrected, and immediately knelt next to the child so she wouldn't loom over her. "So you're going to have a birthday next week? That's pretty special."

Some of the other children crept closer. "Me burfday, too," a boy said.

"Really?" Jessie asked.

"Uh-uh," Flavia declared.

"Uh-huh," he said.

Jessie looked toward the house, but Mrs. Peters had disappeared back inside. She was stuck.

"Everybody has birthdays," Jessie said. "Next week it is Flavia's, but every one of you will get to have a birthday soon, I'll bet."

The two-year-olds crowded around her. Some plumped down on the ground while others stood. "Why?" one of them asked.

"Why what?" Jessie countered. When they simply stared at her she had to find her own answer. "Why does everyone have birthdays?"

A few of the more helpful toddlers nodded.

"Well, celebrating a birthday is the way society determines your place in the world, the kind of things you can or cannot do," Jessie told them. "For instance, once you pass your fifth birthday, you'll be allowed to go to kindergarten. When you pass your sixteenth birthday, you'll be able to get your driver's license. Birthdays are important for these reasons."

They stared at her without blinking. Or so it seemed to Jessie.

"Why?" Flavia asked.

"I just explained that," Jessie told her. "If you want to know the answers to your questions, you'll

just have to pay closer attention in the future. Now, what would you all like to do?"

Not one of the children said a word. A boy who had been playing in the sandbox put his grubby fingers in his mouth and sucked on them.

Jessie quickly pulled them out of his mouth. "Don't do that," she said. "Your hands are full of germs that could make you sick."

"Why?" Flavia asked.

"Why do germs make you sick or why are there germs on his hands?" Jessie countered.

Flavia nodded, which wasn't at all helpful as far as Jessie was concerned.

"Well, germs live in dirt," Jessie explained.

Some of her students looked at the ground. Flavia and the boy with sand-covered fingers stared closely at his hands.

"You can't see them," Jessie said.

"Why?" another child asked.

"Because they are microscopic. If we had a microscope, I could show them to you, but since we don't you'll just have to take my word that they exist."

"Why?"

Jessie turned to face the speaker. "I had a feeling you were going to say that," she said with a sigh. "The answer is, because I've seen germs in biology class, so I know what I'm talking about. Now, germs

can make you sick because that is their job."

"Wh—"

"Why?" Jessie asked. "Because it is."

Flavia shook her head. "No," she insisted. "Where germs work?"

"My daddy goes work," the boy with dirty hands volunteered.

"Mine, too," a chorus of little voices crowed.

"Mommy work," a tiny girl told them all.

Jessie took a deep breath. "Lots of mommies and daddies work."

"Why?"

She'd been expecting the word this time. "Because they do." She half suspected parents went to work not to be able to afford housing, food, and other necessities but to avoid having to answer so many questions from their children. "How about playing a color game?" she suggested.

Eager to participate, a little boy pointed to his T-shirt. "Orange," he said.

"That's right." Jessie grinned, pleased that they were distracted from questioning everything. "How about the swing set. What color is it?"

"Red!" they shouted.

"And the grass?"

"Green!"

Jessie looked around the yard for her next exam-

ple and spotted something special. A ray of sunlight fell directly through the spray of water from the sprinkling system next door. "Oh, look!" she cried pointing. "A rainbow. What colors do you see there?"

"Lots," Flavia said. "Why?"

Jessie groaned.

Chapter 4

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Mr. Belding was working in his front yard, weeding his prize petunia beds, when Slater's truck rolled up to the curb. "Hey, right on time!" the principal called. "I'm impressed, guys."

"We aim to please," Zack declared as he slid out of the truck cab.

Screech tumbled out behind him and rushed over to where Mr. Belding stood. "Gosh! These are the most beautiful petunias I've ever seen. Look at those funnel-shaped corollas!"

"Right," Zack muttered, sauntering over to look

at the flowers. There were purple ones with black centers, lavender ones with purple centers, yellow ones with black centers, and white ones with yellow centers. Rather than plant them in a straight-edged bed, Mr. Belding had sculpted his flower garden so that the bed swooped in giant waves. It looked pretty, but it sure wasn't going to be easy for the lawn mower to weave in and out while cutting the grass.

Not that it was his problem. Screech was in charge of programming the lawn mower and the robot. All Zack had to do was stretch out and catch some rays, then collect their fee while Slater loaded the equipment back on the truck.

"I didn't know you were so knowledgeable about petunias," Mr. Belding said to Screech.

"My grandmother would disown me if I didn't know a pistil from a petal," Screech confessed. "I learned flower biology before I knew my alphabet."

Mr. Belding looked surprised, then smiled widely. "Don't tell me Patsy "Petunia" Powers is your grandmother!"

Screech's face fell with disappointment. "Well, I was going to tell you, but if you don't want me to, I won't."

Slater finished unloading the equipment, then leaned against his truck and cleared his throat. "I

hate to break this up," he said, "but where do you want us to start, Mr. B.?"

"Quite right, Slater. Time's a wasting." The principal glanced quickly around. "Well, first I'd like the lawn cut, but leave the grass at least an inch high."

Zack had his clipboard in hand. "Grass an inch high. Check."

"Then there's the hedge in the backyard. It has to be cut back so it doesn't brush against the cabana." Mr. Belding gestured for the boys to follow him around to the back of the house. "It's a real beaut, too. Mrs. B. gave it to me for my birthday, but I think what she was really doing was hinting that she wants a swimming pool to go with it."

The cabana was red-and-white striped and filled a good bit of the backyard. There was about a foot of space between it and the thick hedge that separated the Belding homestead from the next-door neighbor's yard.

"If the hedge can be trimmed back a good six inches it will give us some room to maneuver. Last night Mrs. B. and I were playing badminton, and we had the darnedest time getting to the birdie whenever it sailed over the cabana," the principal said.

Seeing Screech's concerned expression, Zack hastily put his hand over his friend's mouth before Screech could ask how the birdie felt about such

treatment. They'd been through this before, but he still didn't seem to understand that an actual bird wasn't involved.

"Just leave everything to us, sir," Zack assured Mr. Belding. "You won't even recognize your yard when we're finished."

Mr. Belding chuckled. "You know, if Mrs. Pinkney wasn't vouching for you, that statement would have me worried, Zack. But since she recommends you, I'm so relaxed about letting you do the job that I'm leaving you alone to do it. Mrs. B. is having her hair done, and I'm going to pick her up at the beauty salon and take her out for a nice dinner while you work."

A few minutes later, he got into his car and pulled out on the street, a contented smile on his face.

Slater rubbed his hands together. "Okay, what comes first?"

Zack took a pair of sunglasses out of his shirt pocket and slid them on. "Oh, I don't know. Is there any problem with programming the robot for the hedge, Screech?"

"Not if I get him lined up right," Screech said, his head bent over the control panel. "There. That should do it."

"How about the lawn mower? We haven't had fancy flower beds to work around before."

Slater frowned. "Maybe we should do it by hand."

Zack slid his shades down his nose. "*By hand?*" he demanded in shock.

"Relax, preppie. I didn't suggest you be the one to do it," Slater assured him.

Zack sank back into a lawn chair. "Good. For a minute there you had me worried."

"Slater won't have to do it, either," Screech said. "All I have to do is take a few measurements and feed them into the mower's memory circuits, and it will avoid the flower beds."

"And cut the grass so that it is just an inch tall?" Zack asked.

"No problem," Screech said. He pulled a ruler from his pocket and bent to the ground, measuring a blade of grass.

"Kind of weird, isn't it, wanting the grass a particular length?" Slater murmured.

"Probably to better show off the petunias," Zack said. "What do we care? It isn't as if we're actually doing the work, is it?"

Slater collapsed back in another lawn chair. "Heck, no. Thanks to our buddy the genius, we just lie back and rake in the money."

They were worried enough at first, though, to watch the robot as he attacked the hedge, inching between the overgrown branches and the cabana.

Every snip was masterfully done. The robot even caught the clippings in a basket, leaving no cleanup to do afterward.

The mower worked beautifully, too, gliding over the lawn easily, seeming to sense the contours of the flower beds and avoiding them. Screech measured one of the freshly cut blades of grass and announced that it was exactly one inch in height.

Heaving sighs of relief, all three boys reclined back in lawn chairs in the sun.

"You know," Slater said. "All this work is making me hungry."

"And thirsty," Zack added.

Screech's stomach growled.

"Didn't we pass a Tower of Tacos on our way here?" Slater asked.

"Just a few blocks away," Zack said.

Screech's stomach growled louder. "I could really go for one of their buffalo burritos."

"Buffalo burritos?" Slater muttered in disbelief.

"You know, I thought buffalo would taste a lot like beef, but it's more like chicken," Screech said. He got to his feet. "Anybody else want something?"

Zack and Slater placed orders but didn't budge from their seats. Slater only moved enough to toss Screech the keys to his truck.

"This is the life, isn't it?" Zack asked.

"It's what I like most about living in California," Slater said. "Of course, we could improve on this."

"Mmm," Zack murmured. "What would you add first?"

"Well, instead of Screech bringing me food, it would be a gorgeous girl in a bikini," Slater said.

"And she'd feed us, so we wouldn't have to move a single muscle," Zack said.

"There would be a pool to go with the cabana and—"

Slater broke off when a beach ball flew over the hedge, bounced off the robot's head, and landed in the center of Slater's chest. A girl's squeal of delight followed.

"Hey, this is just what I was going to ask for next," Slater said, holding the brightly colored ball between his hands.

A moment later, a pretty girl with blond hair walked into the yard. "Hi," she said. "Sorry the ball flew over the hedge."

"No problem," Slater insisted, getting to his feet quickly. "Mr. B. didn't tell us he had such beautiful neighbors."

She giggled. "And I didn't know that—oh, my gosh!" she gasped, and pointed at the robot.

Slater glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, that's just—oh, my gosh! *Preppie!*"

Zack practically fell out of his lawn chair at Slater's shout. "What?"

All Slater and the girl could do was point at the rabid robot, though. Elias was no longer trimming the hedge. He was slashing into the cabana.

"What do we do?" Slater demanded. "The robot must have been knocked off center when the ball hit it."

"Stop it! Grab it!" the girl screamed, jumping up and down.

"Grab it? No way am I getting near that thing," Slater declared.

Zack fumbled for Screech's control panel. "Any idea how this works?" he asked.

"Hey, I just lift the stupid machines," Slater said. "I don't run them."

"Do something!" the girl shrieked.

Zack closed his eyes and hit a button. The robot turned. Not toward the hedge, but it turned. As the robot snipped at the cabana some more, Zack hit more buttons. The robot moved back and forth as if dancing while it cut.

"There's got to be an off switch," Slater said.

"I'm trying to find it!" Zack insisted, punching more buttons.

Elias looked over at them, his eyes seeming to glow with mischief.

"*Eek!*" the girl from next door yelled, and jumped behind Slater for protection.

Slater jumped behind Zack. "Hit the right button, preppie," he hissed urgently.

Zack punched the only button left. The glow in the robot's eyes died. The hedge-trimming hands dropped to Elias's sides.

Zack, Slater, and the girl wilted with relief.

"Whoa. At least that's over," Zack said with a sigh.

A moment later the sound of the lawn mower grew louder, and the machine buzzed around the corner.

Zack and Slater jumped up on their lawn chairs. The girl dived back through the hedges to her own house. A little while later the boys heard a door slam shut behind her as she sought safety inside .

The lawn mower cruised through the grass, happily cutting its little heart out.

Zack and Slater relaxed. "It's just doing what it's supposed to do," Slater said. "For a minute there, I thought I was in the middle of a horror show."

"You and me both, buddy," Zack admitted. "I thought it would have taken a lot longer to do the whole front lawn, though."

"Now that you mention it," Slater said, "it would have taken me a lot more time than this to cut it. Maybe we should check?"

The lawn mower finished one swath and turned to do another, heading back toward the boys.

"Let's both go," Zack suggested, and took off running.

Out front everything looked fine at first. Half the lawn stood an inch tall. But the rest was untouched.

"Why did it stop in the middle?" Slater asked.

Zack strolled across the yard and reached down. "This is why," he said, picking up a rock. "It must have hit this and got knocked off course."

"You mean like the robot did?" Slater said.

"Like the robot?" Zack repeated. "Uh-oh."

A moment later, the lawn mower zipped around the corner of the house heading straight for Mr. Belding's beds of prize-winning petunias.

"Preppie!" Slater yelled. "Do something!"

"Stop it!" Zack shouted.

"You stop it!" Slater insisted.

The mower charged into the flower bed, chopping purple, yellow, and white petals to pieces. Petunias fell left and right, the stems cut neatly to within an inch of the ground.

The moment the last flower was snipped, the lawn mower stopped and switched itself off. Zack thought it looked rather proud.

"We're dead," Slater muttered under his breath.

Zack groaned. "Maybe we should leave before Mr. and Mrs. Belding get home?" he suggested.

"I don't think that will help, preppie. Mr. B. knows where we live," Slater reminded.

"Eww," Zack moaned, feeling sick.

"If only Screech had been here," Slater said.

As if conjured, Screech pulled up in Slater's truck. "Were we ever lucky!" he announced. "I was Tower of Taco's one millionth customer! I got my picture taken and—what happened to Mr. Belding's flowers?" he asked, finally noticing the destruction.

"A slight miscalculation?" Zack suggested weakly. "I have a feeling Mr. B. isn't going to be a repeat customer."

Chapter 5

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The last of the little pumpkins had been picked up from the Happy Pumpkin Cottage, and Jessie and Lisa were as relieved to see them go as Mrs. Peters was. Only Kelly was still buoyant. But then she loved taking care of babies.

Lisa collapsed in the backseat of Jessie's car. "I'm glad that's over."

"Until tomorrow afternoon," Jessie said.

Lisa groaned.

"Weren't they angels?" Kelly asked.

"Closer to the opposite," Jessie said as she started her car and pulled out on the street. "I never

knew kids that little could ask so many questions. And they never listened to the answers; they just asked me why again."

"I thought you liked inquiring minds," Kelly teased.

"I've changed my mind," Jessie murmured. "What was Mrs. Peters talking to you about a little while ago, Lisa?"

Lisa sank lower in her seat. "Oh, nothing much. I don't understand why she had a problem with what I did. Could I help it if those kids were in dire need of makeovers? I mean, there was this one child who looked ghastly in pink and another who was wearing a totally wrong shade of green, not to mention the poor dear who was an absolute fright in yellow . . . well, all I did was suggest that a couple of them change clothes with each other, and then I restyled their hair and—"

"Mrs. Peters didn't appreciate the effort?" Kelly asked sarcastically.

"Boy, didn't she. All I was trying to do was improve the appearance of a couple of them. It's never too early to learn how to look your best," Lisa insisted. "But Mrs. Peters said she didn't think the parents would appreciate their children looking any different than when they had dropped them off this morning. I ask you, why would any parent not want their kid to look their best?"

"Things will be better tomorrow," Kelly promised.

"They sure can't be any worse," Jessie said. "Anybody want to trade age groups?"

"Oh, you can't do that," Kelly insisted. "The children are used to you now, Jessie. They'll be much easier to entertain when you see them next."

"You didn't meet Flavia," Jessie mumbled darkly.

"Look on the bright side," Kelly urged. "In four hours we three made a total of $75. That's enough for at least seven Paper Moon Dance tickets. If the guys are doing as well as we did, we'll not only have enough for the dance and stuff, we'll have money left over!"

Jessie sighed deeply. "I hate it when you're this bubbly," she groaned. "But you're right. And it isn't as if I have to put up with Flavia and her friends forever. It's only temporary."

"Thank goodness," Lisa said from her reclining position in the backseat. "I'm worn out. Where do little kids get that much energy?"

"I wish I knew," Jessie declared. "Are they always like that?"

Kelly laughed. "Judging by my own family? Yes. So, are you both going back to work at the Happy Pumpkin Cottage tomorrow?"

"Of course," Lisa said.

"You really think we'd let you down?" Jessie said.

Kelly grinned brightly at her friends. "Just checking," she said.

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Slater and Zack dropped Screech and his inventions at home before heading back to Slater's house. Zack had left his car there after school.

"How long before you think Mr. Belding will be able to see any of us without bursting into tears?" Slater asked.

"A *long* time," Zack said. "We did offer to pay for the cabana, but I don't think he was in the right mood to accept our offer to replant the flower beds."

"I think he would have been okay if Mrs. Pinkney hadn't come by and done that little dance of glee when she saw what was left of the petunias," Slater said.

"You're probably right. Just to be on the safe side, I'm going to be on my best behavior at school for a while," Zack said. "Still, the fault wasn't in Screech's robot. Well, not exactly. Next time we get hungry, let's not send Screech out for food."

"Good idea. If he'd been there instead of us, none of this would have happened. The adjustments were really simple, if only we'd known what to do," Slater mumbled sadly. "Well, at least things will be easier from here on in."

Zack nodded. "As long as the customers I've got lined up don't hear about what happened today, we should be able to pay for the cabana and still have enough left over for tickets."

Slater glanced over at his friend. "What about the tuxedos and the dresses we promised the girls?"

"Hey, the tickets alone are costing a hundred dollars. We'll just wear our best suits, and the girls can trade dresses so they are wearing something that is new to them," Zack said.

Slater shook his head and looked straight ahead. "And I thought it was bad enough seeing Mr. B. break down in tears."

"The girls will get over it," Zack insisted.

"I was thinking of Screech," Slater said. "He went by the formal wear place and saw a pink tux with a purple cummerbund in the window, and he's dying to wear it."

Zack cringed. "Have you asked anybody to the dance yet?"

"No. I thought it might be a good idea to have the tickets in hand first," Slater said.

"They're as good as bought," Zack assured him. "I'll bet Janet Gillespie would jump at a chance to be your date."

Slater shrugged. "She's a little short, don't you think?"

"Ramona Kirby?"

"Cute, but she giggles too much."

"Heidi Bancroft, then."

Slater shook his head. "I'm really not that attracted to blonds."

Zack chuckled. "Yeah, like I'm really going to believe that one. I know what the trouble is, even if you don't."

"You do, huh. So what's the problem, Dr. Morris?"

"None of those girls is Jessie," Zack said.

"Oh, right," Slater growled. "You know Jessie and I decided to just be friends."

"But you can't be," Zack insisted. "Neither one of you has dated anyone seriously since breaking up."

"I wouldn't say that," Slater said. "Kelly and I hit it off nicely for a while there."

Zack growled at the reminder.

Slater chuckled. "I'll find someone to take to the dance, preppie. Don't worry. And so will Jessie. All without your help."

"Okay," Zack said, sounding anything but convinced. "But don't look to me when it's too late and you're left holding nothing more than a ticket while Occupational Haze plays a slow song."

"Occupational Haze doesn't play anything but fast songs," Slater pointed out. "In fact, I read an article in *Music Express* magazine that said . . ."

Slater's voice died away.

"That said what?" Zack asked.

"I don't believe it," Slater said.

"Well, I probably won't believe it, either, but you could still tell me what it said," Zack suggested.

Slater pulled his truck in behind where Zack had parked his car earlier. In the Slater driveway was a long black car with government license plates.

Zack glanced over at it. "Your dad get a new car issued to him?" he asked.

"Dad drives a truck he bought second hand," Slater said.

"Maybe it's in the shop," Zack said.

"I wish," Slater murmured. "But that car can only mean one thing. The general is here."

"The general? Is that good or bad?" Zack asked.

Slater sighed deeply. "Both."

While they sat there, the front door of the Slater home opened and Slater's mom waved to the boys. She smiled happily. "A. C.! You'll never guess who's come to visit," she called. "Your grandfather."

"Your grandfather is a general?" Zack asked, impressed.

"Come on, both of you!" Mrs. Slater motioned for the boys to come into the house. "There's an extra surprise, A. C.," she insisted. "Someone you haven't seen in a very long time."

Slater switched off the engine and groaned loudly. "Oh no. Not—"

While Zack watched, a pretty girl dressed in a camouflage jumpsuit slipped past Mrs. Slater in the doorway and strode across the front lawn toward the truck.

"Hi, soldier," the girl greeted.

Slater dropped his head on his hands where they rested on the steering wheel. "Zack," he mumbled. "Meet my cousin Vicki."

Chapter 6

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"You never told me you had a drop-dead beautiful cousin," Zack said to Slater.

"She isn't," Slater grumbled. "She's a drop-and-give-me-ten cousin."

"Give me ten what?"

"Push-ups."

Figuring Slater was kidding, Zack climbed out of the truck. "Welcome to Palisades," he said to Vicki. "I'm Zack Morris, your cousin's best friend."

"Corporal V. J. Slater," Vicki said. She gripped his hand. Hard. When she let loose, Zack turned with a

silent "ouch" and tried to shake feeling back into his fingers.

"Nice to be here, soldier," Vicki continued, "although the visit was the general's idea, not mine."

"I can believe that one," Slater claimed, slamming the driver's-side door. "What happened, Vic? Get thrown out of that military school you attend?"

"In a way," Vicki admitted. "There was an outbreak of measles, and the general chose to reassign me to attaché duty temporarily rather than risk infection."

Vicki had long curly black hair very much like Slater's, pulled back neatly in a ponytail. Even though she wore no makeup, her eyelashes were long and thick, and they fringed big deep-brown eyes. She definitely wasn't fat, but she wasn't a waif, either. Her shoulders were almost as wide as Slater's.

Her manner fit her physique. Vicki stood at dress ease, her combat-booted feet planted a precise distance apart, her shoulders squared, her hands behind her back.

Slater's mother waved at them from the front porch again. "Come in, all of you," she urged. "A. C., your grandfather's been anxious to see you, and I know he'll want to meet Zack." She let the front screen swing closed behind her and went back into the house.

Slater dropped his hand on Zack's shoulder.

"Sorry, preppie. You're in for it now. My grandfather, the general, will drill us both."

"That's very unfair of you, A. C.," Vicki said.

"But true," Slater insisted. "You're his favorite because you want to follow in his footsteps and have a career in the military. But I don't, so I'm a disappointment as far as he's concerned."

"You're wrong," Vicki said, "but I know I'll never convince you." She turned to Zack. "So what about you, soldier? Which recruitment offices have you visited in preparation for life after graduation?"

Still nursing his bruised hand, Zack looked startled. "None," he admitted.

Vicki shook her head sadly as they all moved toward the house. "I see A. C. has led you astray."

Slater chuckled. "I think it's been the other way around, don't you, preppie?"

"Ah," Vicki murmured. "So you're the bad influence."

"I wouldn't say *bad* exactly," Zack insisted.

"But you see no reason to serve your country," she said. "You aren't patriotic?"

Zack rolled his eyes in Slater's direction. "She obviously hasn't heard about the Morris family's Fourth of July barbecue. We're so patriotic, even the lemonade we serve is red, white, and blue."

Vicki sighed deeply and pulled the front door open. She seemed surprised when both boys waited politely for her to enter the house first.

"Zack agrees with me, Vic," Slater said, holding the door for her. "You don't have to wear a uniform and march in formation to be a credit to your family or your country. You might say we march to a different drummer."

"Like the one who plays with Occupational Haze," Zack said, flashing his killer grin.

Vicki looked through him.

Zack's ego felt as if it had been torpedoed. No girl had ever been able to resist his smile before.

"You're both pathetic," Vicki said. "Is that all you do? Make jokes?"

Slater and Zack looked at each other.

"Yeah," Zack said.

"Pretty much," Slater agreed.

Vicki glared at them and turned on her military booted heel. They watched as she marched away.

"Sorry," Slater mumbled. "She's been like that since she could walk. Her dad is a major, like mine, and she's the son he never had."

"That sounds like a bit of an exaggeration," Zack said.

"It's the truth," Slater explained. "Ever since she was little she wanted to be just like her dad. So far, she's followed exactly in his footsteps, even attending

the same military school he did. The general thinks she's perfect."

"Well, at least the school admits both boys and girls," Zack said.

"Preppie?"

"Huh?"

"Did Vicki remind you of any of the girls we know?"

Zack looked down the hall in the direction Vicki had marched. "Well, she's pretty."

"Does she smile?"

"Well, not that I noticed."

"Does she giggle?"

"Not hardly."

"Does she flirt?"

"Uh . . ."

"Does she wear lipstick? Dresses? Talk about boys? About shopping?"

"Well, no, but since I just met her, I figured—"

"Think about it," Slater insisted. "When she introduced herself, did she even call herself by her name?"

Zack opened his mouth, but Slater trudged right on ahead without waiting for an answer.

"No," he said. "She gave you her rank at the school and her initials."

"Well, you use your initials," Zack pointed out. "I thought maybe it was a family tradition."

Slater shook his head sadly. "Maybe I'm being too critical. She is my cousin, but I can't say I like her."

"I heard that, A. C.," a soft voice murmured behind the boys.

They both turned quickly.

"Mom!" Slater gasped.

Mrs. Slater sighed. "I know why you feel the way you do, A. C.," she said. "And in a way, I agree with you. Growing up in a military environment has kept Vicki from knowing anything about what life is like outside the base gates. But I also think that you and Zack and your friends can do something to change that during her visit with us."

Slater looked suspicious. "I don't think I'm going to like this."

Mrs. Slater gave him a fond smile. "You might," she said. "And I promise it will be fairly painless. Here's what I want you to do."

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Lisa sat in the middle of her bed and held the telephone receiver away from her ear, looking at it in disbelief.

"You want me to what?" she said.

"Do a makeover," Zack's voice said.

Lisa tucked the phone back between her ear and her shoulder and picked up an emery board. "Listen, sweetie, I got in trouble for doing makeovers earlier

today. I'm not sure I want to chance it again." She filed a rough spot on one of her carefully manicured nails.

"You'll kick yourself if you pass up this opportunity," Zack insisted. "As it is, the subject isn't totally sold on the idea. If the general wasn't behind it, I don't think this soldier would have even let us talk her into a consultation."

"What? You're not making sense, Zack. What general? What soldier? And why do I want to even listen to you, much less help you?" Lisa demanded.

"It's not for me, Lise," Zack insisted. "It's for Slater."

Lisa shook her head and stared at the phone again. "I thought you said you wanted me to do a makeover on a girl."

"I do. Slater's cousin."

"Slater has a cousin?" Lisa gasped. "What's she look like?"

"Well, like Slater, actually. Well, not exactly, but . . . come over here and meet her for yourself," Zack wheedled. "Vicki is in desperate need of a miracle, and you're the only one who can work it."

Lisa studied her nails. "Only me?"

"No one else," Zack insisted, buttering her up.

"She really needs help?"

"Lise, she's wearing camouflage gear and combat boots," Zack said.

"Well, that is one kind of fashion statement," Lisa admitted.

"Believe me. She's not making a fashion statement," Zack said.

Lisa weakened. "I suppose I could come by for a short while."

"Great! Before you do, stop by Jessie's house and raid her closet," Zack suggested.

"What?"

"Vicki is tall. Maybe some of Jess's stuff will fit her."

Lisa drummed her fingers against her bedspread. "Just because Slater's cousin is tall doesn't necessarily mean that the same color schemes will work for her as—"

"Black hair, brown eyes," Zack interrupted to say.

"Then there's skin tones and—"

"Be here in half an hour?" Zack asked.

Lisa glanced at the clock on her bedside table. "She's really a challenge?"

"Absolutely."

Lisa considered for a moment, then scooted off her bed. "Honey, I'll be there in fifteen," she promised.

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Jessie and Kelly arrived at Slater's house ten minutes behind Lisa.

"What's the big excitement?" Kelly asked as she nearly ran into Jessie on the front lawn.

"Search me," Jessie said. "All Lisa told me was to raid my closet. She even told me which outfits to bring."

"She had me bring the makeup samples we got at the mall last week. You know, the ones that made me look like a zombie? It was a good thing I hadn't thrown them out yet," Kelly said.

"You were keeping them?" Jessie sounded shocked.

"I was using them as decoys so Nicki and Erin wouldn't get into my good makeup," Kelly explained. "Sisters have no respect for your personal belongings. They will borrow you blind."

"Sort of like Lisa is doing to us at the moment?" Jessie asked.

Kelly giggled. "Exactly!"

Mrs. Slater answered the door when they knocked. "Jessie! Kelly! I'm so glad you both could come."

"Lisa said it was an emergency," Jessie said. "But what sort of emergency involves my clothes?"

"Or my makeup?" Kelly asked.

"Come and see," Mrs. Slater invited. She led them upstairs and down the hall to her own bedroom.

When they all passed the door to Slater's room, he and Zack looked up briefly from the video game they were playing.

"Reinforcements!" Zack crowed.

"Good luck," Slater called. "I personally think you're going to need it."

"Skeptic," Mrs. Slater said. "This way, girls." She opened the door to the master bedroom just enough for them to squeeze through, then followed them in and shut it behind her again.

Lisa stood in the middle of the room considering a girl who might have looked a lot like Slater if she didn't have a ton of green goop on her face. "Do I have to wear this much longer?" the stranger asked without moving her mouth.

"Two more minutes," Lisa declared, and spun to greet her friends. "Jessie, Kelly. This is Vicki. Our assignment is to turn her into a girl."

"I already am a girl," Vicki mumbled.

"Don't talk," Lisa said. "You'll weaken the effect of the beauty pack if you break it. And considering the shape you were in when I arrived, I have to say it was hard to tell what you were.

"Now, Jessie. Did you bring that red dress you rarely wear?" Lisa asked.

Jessie held up the garment bag that was draped over her arm. "Right here. Complete with matching shoes."

"Great! Kelly, have you got the makeup and that raspberry red lipstick?"

"I brought the nail polish and fake nails, too," Kelly said.

"Terrific!" Lisa walked back to where Vicki sat fidgeting. "Oh, darn, I forgot about jewelry."

"Feel free to raid my jewelry box," Mrs. Slater said. "In the meantime, can I bring any of you something to drink or eat?"

Vicki raised her hand to make a request, but when Lisa looked at her sternly, she dropped it back into her lap.

Mrs. Slater grinned with amusement. "Relax, Vicki," she recommended. "Believe it or not, this is for your own good."

"And believe me," Lisa added as Slater's mother slipped out of the room, "you'll like the new you."

Vicki didn't look very convinced. She pointed to Lisa's watch and then at her face.

"Oh, all right. Go wash the mask off," Lisa said. "I suppose another thirty seconds won't make that much of a difference. You know," she confided to her friends once Vicki had the water running in the next room, "this is really fun."

"Fun?" Jessie echoed. "Lisa, you're ordering that poor girl around as if you were a drill sergeant."

"Yeah. Isn't it great?" Lisa said.

"I wouldn't call it great," Kelly insisted. "Horrible is more like it. How can you be so mean?"

Lisa grinned widely. "I'm just following orders," she said. "You didn't happen to meet Slater's grandfather when you arrived, did you? Well, I did, and he told the corporal—that's Vicki—to do everything I told her to do."

"That wouldn't make me do everything you tell me to do," Jessie said.

"That's because you aren't used to following orders and Vicki is," Lisa confided. "Can you imagine? She always does what someone tells her to do without ever asking them why."

Kelly giggled. "Maybe you should introduce her to the two-year-olds at the Happy Pumpkin Cottage, Jessie."

"Slater's mother told me that Vicki has never wanted to be anything but a soldier," Lisa said. "Not that that's bad, but Mrs. Slater thinks Vicki should have a taste of what it's like not to be a soldier, too."

"And that's where we come in, huh?" Jessie asked.

"Sort of," Lisa murmured. "But the real test will be when we take her to the Max."

"The Max? I don't understand," Jessie said.

Kelly rolled her eyes. "You know," she insisted.

"Guys. I'll bet when Lisa is done, Vicki Slater will be a knockout."

"You better believe it, girl," Lisa said. "In fact, I predict that boys will be tripping over themselves to meet her."

Chapter 7

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An hour later, Lisa stood back and admired her creation.

Mrs. Slater sank into a chair in amazement, and Jessie and Kelly were equally stunned.

Vicki stood before them in Jessie's borrowed dress. The short skirt showed off Vicki's long legs. The way Lisa had styled her curly black hair made it feather around her face, softening her features. The makeup that had been totally wrong for Kelly's coloring was perfect for Vicki's darker skin tones. Coats of carefully applied mascara turned her lashes into

starbursts that drew attention to her soft brown eyes.

"Wow!" Kelly breathed in wonder. "You're absolutely gorgeous, Vicki!"

The newly remodeled girl blushed and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. "I feel silly," she said.

"You look anything but silly," Mrs. Slater said. "In fact, I never noticed how much you resemble your grandmother before, darling."

"My grandmother?" Vicki asked.

"The general's wife," Mrs. Slater explained. "She died young, before either you or A. C. were born. Ask him to show you pictures of her when they were first married, and you'll see what I mean."

"Forget the pictures for now," Lisa said. "It's time to let you get a taste of power."

"You forget," Vicki said, "I already know how it feels to command. I've been a corporal at the academy for a long time now and am up for promotion to sergeant next month."

Lisa waved such fanciful notions away. "Not that. I mean real power," she insisted. "Until you've had boys begging you to go out with them, you don't know how good life can be."

Kelly giggled. "Trust Lisa on this, Vicki. She is the dating queen of Bayside High."

"Was," Lisa insisted sternly. "Since I met Keith, I've hardly even looked at another boy."

"What about Ram, the surfer you met out at Smuggler's Cove?" Jessie asked.

"I did say hardly," Lisa said.

This time, even Vicki giggled.

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Kelly and Jessie forced Slater and Zack down the stairs ahead of them and toward the family room where Slater's dad, the major, and his grandfather, the general, sat talking.

The major looked up as soon as the girls herded the boys into the room. "I take it the maneuver was successful?" he said with a smile.

"More than successful," Jessie told him. "But we want to caution you all to make only encouraging comments when Vicki comes downstairs."

"You have my promise, young lady," the older man in a military uniform assured her.

Slater's dad's smile grew wider. "General, I'd like you to meet A. C.'s very good friends, Jessie Spano and Kelly Kapowski. Ladies, my father, General Slater."

"Ah, I've heard a lot about you, Jessie Spano," the general said.

Jessie glanced quickly at Slater.

His grandfather chuckled. "All good, I assure you."

Jessie sighed in relief and sank down in a chair, suddenly feeling quite exhausted.

Apparently Kelly felt the same way, because she collapsed on a floor pillow next to Zack. "Lisa insists we take Vicki to the Max tonight," she said. "We can't stay very late, though. I've still got some homework to finish."

"Me, too," Zack confessed.

Kelly looked at him in surprise. "You? Do homework?" She put her hand to his brow. "Funny, you don't feel as if you've got a fever."

"Ha, ha," Zack said. "The fact is, I've got to be a model student for a few weeks. Mr. Belding is a little upset with me at the moment."

"A little?" Slater murmured, and chuckled.

"Shh!" Kelly hissed, hearing the sound of footsteps on the stairs. "Remember. Be nice."

A moment later Lisa and Mrs. Slater slipped into the room. Slater's mother took a seat next to her husband, but Lisa stood in the archway clearing her throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she announced, "I would like to introduce you all to Ms. Victoria Jane Slater."

When Vicki didn't appear, Lisa grabbed her hand and pulled her into the room.

"Whoa!" Zack said with an audible gulp.

"Vic?" Slater gasped.

The general fished for his handkerchief. "You look lovely, soldier," he said.

Jessie leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

"I mean, my dear," he corrected himself. "Jessie is quite right. You aren't a soldier at the moment but an extremely lovely young woman."

Vicki got a little weepy-eyed herself. Lisa dashed forward with a tissue. "Dab," she instructed. "You don't want to ruin your makeup. We've got some celebrating to do, don't we, gang?"

"Absolutely," Mrs. Slater said. "While you are with us you are going to act just like any other teenage girl would, and that means going out with A. C. and his friends. Isn't that right, general?"

"It's not only right, Loretta," the general declared, "it's an order."

Vicki looked a bit lost. "But I don't know how to act like a civilian, sir."

Lisa linked arms with her. "Then stick with me, Vicki, and you'll soon get the knack. Our first stop is the Max. That's our regular hangout," she explained.

"But don't you all have schoolwork to do tonight?" Vicki asked. "At the academy we spend four to five hours on our studies."

"You're kidding!" Lisa said. "Oh, you mean in a week, right?"

"A night," Vicki said.

Lisa gaped at her. "That can't be right. You'd

never have a chance to watch *Hammond Court* or *New York 212-555-2000.*"

"What are those?" Vicki asked.

"Girl, where have you been?" Lisa demanded. "They are the hottest shows on TV!"

Vicki nodded, understanding. "That explains it," she said. "We don't have televisions outside of the classrooms at the academy."

Lisa's mouth dropped open at the announcement. She shook her head sadly. "The next thing I know, you'll tell me they don't have shopping malls nearby."

"Actually—"

Slater jumped to his feet and put his hand over his cousin's mouth before she could really startle Lisa. "Hey!" he said. "Weren't we on our way out the door?"

Before the gang could scramble to their feet, the front doorbell pealed.

"Must be Screech," Zack said. "I called him a little while ago to come meet us." He darted for the door.

Mrs. Slater glanced out the window. "It looks like the breeze has picked up. Why don't you wear one of my jackets, Vicki. I keep them in the hall closet."

"Good idea, Aunt Loretta," the girl said, and slipped out of the room.

As luck would have it, Vicki was just behind Zack when he pulled the door open.

"Hey, you're just in time, Screech," Zack greeted.

Screech blinked in the bright glare of the porch light. "You said something about meeting . . ."

He stared past Zack, his words fading away.

Zack glanced back over his shoulder. "Oh, yeah. This is—"

"A goddess," Screech breathed with feeling as he gazed at Vicki in wonder.

She looked thunderstruck. "Me? A goddess?" she murmured faintly.

"No," Screech said, falling to his knees in adoration. "*My* goddess."

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Most of the gang was squeezed into their usual booth at the Max, drained cola glasses before them.

"I don't believe it," Zack muttered. "I've been sitting here for an hour watching, but I still don't believe it."

"Isn't it beautiful?" Kelly said, and sighed dreamily. "Love at first sight."

"It's weird, if you ask me," Lisa insisted. "I mean, sure, I expected some guy to fall madly in love with Vicki, but I never figured she'd fall in love with him, too."

"Or that it would be Screech she fell in love with," Slater said.

Everybody stared at the booth in the corner where Vicki in her borrowed red dress sat across from Screech. They were sharing a butterscotch milk shake, their straws crossing in the glass, their foreheads nearly touching as they sipped.

"My Aphrodite," Screech sighed happily.

"My Apollo," Vicki answered, gazing at him in wonder.

"My stomach," Zack complained. "I haven't heard such bad dialogue since Kelly dragged me to see the latest Mitch Tobi—er, that is, since *long* before Kelly and I enjoyed the latest Mitch Tobias movie."

"That's wrong, you know," Jessie said.

"No, really," Zack insisted.

"I mean the Aphrodite and Apollo stuff," she said. "Granted Vicki is gorgeous enough to play Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love and beauty, but there is no way Screech fits Apollo, the god of sunlight, prophecy, music, and poetry."

"I thought Apollo was a real hunk," Lisa said.

"I rest my point," Jessie declared. "I mean, we're Screech's best friends and love him dearly, but facts are facts, and—"

Kelly sighed again. "Love is blind," she murmured.

"There's blind and then there's ridiculous," Lisa insisted.

Kelly smiled sadly across the table at her friend. "It must be hard to lose his adoration."

Lisa sat up straighter. "What!"

"It's the truth, isn't it?" Kelly said.

"No way."

"Well, you've lost me," Slater said. "What are you talking about?"

"Only that Lisa is jealous."

"Of who?" Slater demanded.

"Of what?" Zack asked.

"Of Vicki. Of Screech and Vicki," Kelly said.

"No way!" Lisa, Slater, and Zack insisted in unison.

"Way," Jessie said. "I agree with Kelly. Ever since . . . well, forever, Screech has worshiped the ground you walk on, Lisa. And even though you insult him constantly and date other guys, he has kept you on a pedestal. You've been his ideal."

Lisa frowned. "Get out of here. Screech has dated, too. He and Nanny Parker were a real item—if you can call the geek and any girl that—for months."

"But all you had to do is crook your finger and he was your puppet once again," Kelly said.

Lisa stared into her empty soda glass.

"Well?" Jessie hissed when her friend didn't answer.

"Okay, yeah, he did forget all about Nanny whenever I wanted him to do something for me," Lisa admitted sullenly.

"He did?" Zack asked, stunned. "I never noticed that."

"Boys never notice things like that," Kelly told him, and patted his hand. "That's okay. I love you anyway."

"I am not jealous of Vicki," Lisa insisted. "I created Vicki. I can turn her back into a plain girl in spotted green clothes."

"You mean camouflage gear," Slater said.

"I mean spotted green clothes," Lisa growled.

"Works for me," Slater murmured hastily.

Jessie shook her head. "Actually, I think when Vicki wakes up tomorrow, she'll be back to being her old self again."

"Face it," Kelly said. "Other than Jessie's dress, all she's got to wear are uniforms that do absolutely nothing for her. Maybe if we took her shopping for more attractive clothes—"

"You can take her shopping," Lisa said. "I'm washing my hands of her. Here I put my best effort into making her a knockout, and she wastes all that work on Screech. *Screech!* What is the world coming to?"

"Relax, Lise. Chances are once Vicki's back to

normal, Screech will forget all about her," Zack counseled.

"Yeah," Slater added. "Besides, she's only here for a short visit. By the end of the week she'll be on her way back to the academy, and we'll be getting ready to enjoy a night with Occupational Haze."

Zack leaned back in his seat and stretched. "Ah, the good life," he murmured in contentment. "Despite the setback we suffered at Mr. Belding's, I'd say we'll soon have all our tickets in hand."

"And thanks to the little pumpkins at the Happy Pumpkin Cottage, we'll have new dresses and tuxedos, too," Kelly added.

"I can almost hear the music already," Zack said.

"I don't know," Lisa mumbled beneath her breath. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Chapter 8

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Screech was in heaven. Gallantly, he let Vicki slurp up the last of their shared milk shake. She did it so daintily, he thought, so perfectly. When the straw rattled, signaling that the glass was empty, the sound was music to his ears.

"Thank you, Sam," she said.

Sam. Screech sighed happily. He was Samuel to his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Since elementary school he'd been Screech to his friends and school companions. The girls he'd dated had sometimes called him Sammy. But until Vicki walked

into his life, no one had ever called him Sam.

Sam. It sounded so manly, so buff. It sounded like he had it all together. Like he was a jock rather than a geek.

From across the table, Vicki smiled softly at him. "Being with you is so wonderful, Sam," she said. "You're such a great date."

A great date? Screech's heart swelled with pride. "With you, my darling, it's easy."

She sighed with pleasure.

So did Screech.

"I like the sound of that," Vicki told him. "No one has ever called me *darling* before. It's kind of nice."

He stared at her. "You're kidding!"

Vicki shook her head. "No. At the academy, the other soldiers address me as *corporal* or they get put on report."

"Even when you're on a date with one of them?" Screech asked.

"A well-trained soldier always follows the rules," Vicki said. "The very first rule to follow in a coed academy is no dating of comrades-in-uniform. Actually," she admitted shyly, "this is my first date."

"With a friend of your cousin, you mean," Screech said.

"No," Vicki corrected. "The first one ever."

"Wow!" Screech murmured.

Vicki fluttered her eyelashes. "I'm so glad I'm with you, Sam. You're so experienced and know exactly what to do. You can tell me how to act."

Experienced? Him? *Whoa!*

Still, considering that Vicki was as gorgeous as Kelly and as smart as Jessie, it was difficult to believe that some good-looking guy like Zack or a jock like Slater had never asked her out. She obviously had turned them down, waiting until a stud muffin like himself came along.

"I'm curious," Screech admitted. "If you don't date other students at the academy, does that mean that everyone goes stag to the school dances?"

"No," she said.

"Interesting," he murmured, looking thoughtful. "I suppose that makes it easier to—"

"We don't have school dances," Vicki said.

"—meet a great numb—er, what did you say?"

"The academy doesn't hold dances, Sam."

Screech's mouth dropped open. "None? Never?"

"No," Vicki answered, looking confused. "What purpose would they serve? It is much more practical to run obstacle courses, practice self-defense, and study leadership techniques."

"It is?" Screech asked, gaping at her.

"Sure," she said. "Don't you feel really pumped after finishing an obstacle course in record time?"

Screech shrugged. "I don't know. I've never run one."

Vicki blinked at him in surprise. "You haven't? Oh well, a concentration on self-defense techniques will get the adrenaline flowing even faster. I suppose you've got a black belt in karate."

Screech shook his head. "No, but I've got one in chartreuse that looks terrific with my purple plaid pants."

Vicki giggled. "Oh, you're such a kidder," she murmured, looking at him through flirtatiously lowered lashes.

He hadn't been kidding, but with as beautiful a girl as Vicki looking at him as if he were the most wonderful thing since peanut-butter pizza, Screech wasn't about to correct her misconception.

Thinking about the pizza made his stomach sit up and take notice. It didn't actually growl, but it did whimper a bit.

"Are you in need of nourishment, my sweet?" Screech asked. "If you like, we could order something here. I highly recommend the triple-decker burger with super special sauce. Or we could go to a select little pizza parlor where the cheese is aged to perfection and the root beer has an unsurpassed delicacy of taste."

"Anywhere with you would be wonderful, Sam," Vicki said softly.

Screech's chest puffed up with pride. He rose to his feet and offered her his arm, his elbow crooked toward her. "Pizza it is, my darling," he announced. When Vicki slid out of the booth, grinning adoringly at him, and slipped her hand along his arm, Screech felt all was right with the world.

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Saturday morning it took Zack a while to remember why his alarm was set on a weekend. Then it came to him. Morris, Slater, and Powers, landscape grooming specialists, were scheduled to take care of six different lawns that day.

It was tough to get out of bed even with the lure of easy money in mind. And it wasn't as if he were actually going to do anything more strenuous than count the cash they received. Screech's super inventions would do the actual toiling.

Slater pulled up in the Morris driveway twenty minutes later dressed in cutoff jeans and a muscle shirt. He had a sweatband tied around his brow. Yeah, as if it was really needed, Zack thought.

"We've got trouble, preppie," Slater announced as he strolled into the Morris kitchen. The back screen door swung shut behind him with a slight bang.

Zack looked up from shoveling cereal into his mouth. "Elias needs oil?" he asked. The robot needed his joints oiled to stay flexible enough to snip at shrubbery.

"Nope," Slater said.

"Ah, of course. We need to stop and get gas for the lawn mower," Zack said. "I'll borrow the can my dad uses for fuel and—"

"We'll need to borrow more than that," Slater insisted.

"Oh, right. With six jobs, we'll need more than a single gallon of gas. I'll go see if they've got an extra container over at Jessie's next door, then—"

"See if we can borrow any and all of the garden tools Jessie's got, and then get your Dad's as well," Slater said. "Screech isn't coming with us today. He's going shopping with Vicki."

The cereal spoon halfway to his mouth, Zack froze. "Shopping?"

Slater dropped down into the chair across from Zack. "Well, she doesn't have anything but fatigues to wear," he pointed out. "Kelly had to baby-sit for her little brother and sister today. Jessie had some environmental protest to go to with Green Teens, and Lisa claimed she was too busy finding the best deals on things for the rest of us to wear to the Paper Moon Dance to have time to find a complete wardrobe for Vicki."

"So Screech is helping her? The guy most people

would call a fashion disaster?" Zack put his spoon down. Suddenly he no longer had an appetite.

"I know," Slater murmured. "I hope Vicki will have better taste than he does. But you know what his desertion means, don't you?"

Zack nodded. "We go on without him. Not only do we have all these customers lined up, we've got less than a week to come up with the money we need for those tickets. The Alpha Betas are saving ten of them for us but only through Tuesday."

Slater's eyebrows rose. "They are? What did you promise them?"

"A dozen nights of romance," Zack said.

Slater snorted. "Yeah, and how are you going to date a dozen Alpha Beta Delta girls and not have Kelly find out?"

Zack leaned back in his chair and grinned lazily. "By not dating any Alpha Beta Delta girls myself," he said. "I promised them you would date them."

Slater bolted upright in his chair. "*Me!*"

"Can I help it if you've put yourself in a position to have beautiful girls throwing themselves at you?" Zack asked. "There isn't a girl alive who doesn't want to remember the night she dated the captain of the football team."

Slater frowned. "That's dumb. Who told you such a whopper?"

"The Alpha Beta Delta girls," Zack said. "Besides, it's for a good cause. Just think how indebted to you we'll all be for making it possible for us to see Occupational Haze."

"Now, why am I not overjoyed at the prospect?" Slater asked. He pushed to his feet. "Well, if we don't get to work, we won't have enough money to go to the Paper Moon Dance. Ready?"

Zack didn't get up. "Are you sure you remember how to program Elias and the mower? I know Screech showed us what to do, but I'm not sure I remember everything he said."

Slater shook his head sadly. "You mean, you didn't pay any attention to what he said," he translated.

"Well, yeah. That, too," Zack confessed.

"Not to worry, preppie," Slater counseled, and clapped a hand down on his friend's shoulder. "When Screech told me he wasn't coming, I left Elias and the remote mower at his house and loaded my parents' lawn equipment onto the truck."

Zack looked a bit ill. "Does that mean what I think it means?" he asked.

"Yep," Slater assured him. "We're not taking any chance of repeating what happened at Mr. Belding's house. Instead, we're doing today's jobs the old-fashioned way—using our own manual labor."

"I was afraid of that," Zack moaned.

"Of course, if you want to call and cancel those tickets . . ."

Zack pushed reluctantly to his feet and dragged after Slater to the door. "Boy, talk about not playing fair. Where did you learn to be so manipulative?"

Slater shrugged, but his dimples flashed in a wide grin. "Hmm. Do you think it's the company I keep?"

Zack grimaced. "Low blow, Slater."

Slater's grin widened even more. "But true, Zack. Oh, so true."

Chapter 9

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Screech stood in front of the full-length mirror staring at himself in stunned amazement.

"Oh, Sam, you look so handsome," Vicki crooned.

"I do?"

The outfit seemed to be missing a lot as far as he was concerned. While there was nothing wrong with the varied shades of green in the camouflage shirt and pants, he would have preferred the orange-and-black combination he'd seen on the shelf. Vicki had explained to him that it was hunter's gear, something to make him visible to other hunters so he wouldn't get shot by accident. She had insisted that the wood-

lands greens were far more complimentary to him, but Screech had his doubts.

"Now for the final touch," Vicki said, and stepped in front of him.

She hadn't used makeup today and was wearing camouflage clothing herself, down to the same heavy black laced-up boots she had urged him to get.

"There," she said, settling a wool beret on his head. "Although it isn't an official part of fatigues, this is the kind of hat commando teams wear with their dress uniform."

Screech puffed up even more just knowing she thought he was as macho as a commando. Wasn't that what most of those guys in the martial arts movies were? Guys like Jean-Pierre Van Darne and Samson Salzerbeckerman.

Screech struck a pose like that of a muscle builder. Yes, he could see it. When the light hit him a certain way, he was just as tough-looking as Jean-Pierre, and he already shared part of a name with Samson Salzerbeckerman.

Vicki stood back, admiring his new look. "Now I know what girls mean when they say a boy looks super dreamy," she said.

Screech struck another pose.

"Oh, what am I going to do without you, Sam?" Vicki murmured sadly. "I had so much fun last night. I never knew peanut butter on a pizza could be so delicious. I never knew how bright the stars were at night or how peaceful the ocean looks and sounds beneath them."

"I told you that particular pizza parlor was special, toots," Screech said. "And since it was our first date, I wanted to pull out all the stops. That's why we walked along the beach at Smuggler's Cove."

Vicki nodded. "It was especially lovely since you single-handedly saved that beach from developers and surfers by dueling with volleyballs," she said.

"Actually," Screech admitted modestly, "my friends helped a bit. Your cousin A. C. advised me on how to overcome a minor flaw in my volleyball serve during practice sessions. But when it came down to the final moments of play, I have to say it was my leadership ability that led the team to victory over our opponents."

"And to cleansing the beach of their presence," Vicki added admiringly. "You were so brave."

True, Screech thought. Of course, he had a feeling that the rest of his friends might remember that particular volleyball game in a slightly different light, as would the surfers they had faced down over a net. But since none of them was around, his version of the event would have to do.

And if he was going to be truthful with himself,

while strolling the moonlit beach with Vicki, Screech had kept a close watch for Ram, Inga, and the other surfers who frequently rode the waves at Smuggler's Cove. Despite his new resemblance to Jean-Pierre and Salzerbeckerman, Screech knew his karate yell was far better than any of his karate moves.

"But you know, Sam," Vicki mused, "the pizza and the beach were nothing when compared to the way you danced with me in the parking lot at your school."

"It was as close as I could come to taking you to the dance at Bayside this week," Screech said. "If you could convince your grandfather to stay two days longer, we could go to the Paper Moon Dance together."

"I wish the general could extend our R and R for forty-eight hours," Vicki murmured sadly. "But he has a staff meeting that can't be put off."

"I thought he was retired," Screech said.

"Oh, he is, but he's still very strict with his housekeeper and the gardener," Vicki explained. "He believes in a regimented schedule. Besides, I have to get back to the academy. But I will miss you, Sam." She paused a moment, considering him. "Unless—no, I guess that wouldn't work."

Screech perked up. "Unless what, my delicate orchid?"

"Oh, nothing." Vicki looked down at her highly polished combat boots.

Screech took the tip of her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her face up. "Tell me," he urged softly. "Please?"

Vicki sighed deeply. "I was just thinking about how we could be together if you transferred to the academy," she said. "Oh, we wouldn't be able to date because it's against the rules, but we could be on the same missions, could train together. And after graduation, we could join the army together," she said. "The army doesn't have a dating restriction, you know, and we could share a career, a future."

"The academy?" Screech croaked, his voice suddenly more strained than usual. "Transfer?"

Vicki hugged him. "Yes! Wouldn't it be wonderful?"

"Yes, but what about Bayside?" Screech asked.

"Oh, Sam. Don't be silly. Having talked to your friend Lisa, I know Bayside isn't the most academically superior school. But I also know that your grades are super high, so they will get you into the academy even without the general's recommendation."

"Your grandfather would recommend me?" he repeated, further stunned.

"If I ask him to," Vicki said. "I rarely ask him for anything, so I know he'd help you if I want him to."

"What about my friends here?" Screech asked.

"They can visit you. You can write to them on

Saturdays. That's when we're required to correspond with civilians," Vicki said. "You'll be so busy once you arrive that you won't have time to miss them. And besides, I'll be there. We'll be able to do everything together. The ten-mile hikes, survival training, parachute practice, and drill formation marching. Doesn't it sound great?"

Screech glanced past her into the mirror. Jean-Pierre/Salzerbeckerman looked back at him. Wearing the camouflage clothing made him feel more muscular, more daring, more the kind of man he had secretly wondered if he could ever be.

"The general could make sure that you are in all the same classes I am," Vicki continued. "You wouldn't be totally alone. And as a corporal, I could order a couple of the soldiers in your sector to show you how to act when I'm not there to help you."

Screech frowned slightly. "My sector?" he said.

"Yes, of course. While the males and females train together, we live in segregated quarters," Vicki explained. "I'll bet you can test through the ranks very quickly and graduate as a sergeant, just as I will. The general would be able to tell us what you need to do."

"Let me get this straight," Screech said. "I would live on the boys' side but see you everyday?"

"Nearly all day," Vicki promised. "From breakfast until lights out, we could be together."

"But we wouldn't be able to date?"

She shook her head, tossing her coal black curls. "Isn't being together constantly as we train so much better than dating?" she asked. "I mean, dancing is nice and so is walking on the beach, but just wait until you swing over a water hazard next to me or crawl on your belly through a field with me by your side. Now, that's excitement, Sam."

"What about kissing?" Screech asked.

"Kissing?" Vicki's eyes grew wide. Even without makeup her lashes were long and lush around them, making them appear even bigger.

"You said dating is against the rules, but is there any rule against kissing?"

Vicki stared at him. "You want to kiss me?" she murmured as if unable to believe the statement.

Screech nodded, quite serious.

"Oh, Sam!" Vicki said, her voice as soft as a breath. "Do you know, I can't remember anything in the rules against kissing."

"Good," Screech said. "So, what do I have to be able to do to be accepted at the academy?"

"Oh, Sam!" Vicki cried, and threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so happy!"

Rather than wait until he was an official cadet at her school, Screech kissed Vicki now. He was very pleased when she seemed to like it.

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Monday morning at school, Lisa stood near her open locker with a small notebook in her hand and Jessie and Kelly on either side of her.

"I found a darling sheath dress in watered silk that is the same shade as your eyes, Kelly," Lisa said. "The store is holding it for you to try on this evening after we finish at the Happy Pumpkin."

Lisa made a note on her tablet, checking off things on a list.

"I've got a deep emerald green satin for you, Jessie. Very chic, very classic. You'll look gorgeous in it," Lisa declared, and made another check mark on her page.

"I can't believe you found us dresses so fast!" Kelly gushed in awe.

"Not that fast, girlfriend. It took me all weekend. If Keith hadn't been with the tennis team in San Francisco, I doubt I would have accomplished this much," Lisa admitted. "I just hope you like what I found for you."

"Are you kidding?" Jessie demanded. "You know exactly which styles we like to wear and what colors we look best in."

"*And* the prices we can afford," Kelly added.

Lisa snapped her notebook shut. "Well, at least money wasn't something I had to worry about this

time, considering the amount we're making at the day care."

Kelly grinned at her friend. "That almost sounds as if you want to keep this job rather than give it up at the end of the week."

"I would," Lisa said, "if it weren't for the fact that the kids drive me nuts. I don't think I want a big family when I get married. Actually, I'm really beginning to realize that being an only child is quite nice."

"Oh, you don't mean that!" Kelly cried.

"Believe her," Jessie urged. "I know exactly what Lisa is talking about, but I'm enjoying being with the two-year-olds now. I've even gotten used to Flavia's constant questions."

"You have?" Lisa gasped.

"Oh, I'm so glad," Kelly said.

"Well, it wasn't easy," Jessie insisted. "What I'm doing is asking her a lot of questions in return. Did you know she has an older sister who sometimes works at the day care, too?"

"Gosh! That's right!" Kelly gushed. "I forgot all about Yvette. She's our age but she goes to Palisades High School of Performing Arts. Yvette wants to be a dancer."

"Whoa, that's a lot of strenuous work," Lisa said. "She's probably too tired to deal with a bunch of little kids after school."

"Actually," Jessie said, "Flavia says her sister has been practicing for the show they gave at Performing Arts this past weekend."

"Maybe Yvette will be at Happy Pumpkin later today then," Kelly said. "Oh, I hope so. She's so nice!"

"Well, whether she is or isn't," Lisa declared, "as soon as Mrs. Peters pays us today, we're off to the mall. I found the most gorgeous peach gown for myself. You'll just die when—" She came to an abrupt halt and stared at a student across the hall. "Screech?" she gasped in disbelief. "Is that you?"

He spun smartly on his heel and came to attention, giving her a snappy salute. "In the flesh, babe," he said.

Lisa collapsed weakly against her locker. "What happened to you?" she demanded.

"Like the new look? Vicki thinks it gives me a certain panache," Screech said.

"More likely you'll be flattened like a pancake once the ROTC guys see you in their gear," Lisa insisted. "What possessed you to wear such ugly spotted green clothes?"

Screech smirked knowingly as he swaggered over to where the girls stood gawking at him. "I know what your problem is, little lady."

"You do?" Lisa asked.

"*Little lady?*" Jessie repeated faintly.

"Can't keep your eyes off the new me, can you?" Screech chipped Lisa gently on the chin with his fist. "We macho types understand that, doll."

"*Doll?*" Jessie growled. "I never thought I'd see you turn into a Neanderthal on us, Screech."

"Make that mega Neanderthal," Lisa corrected.

Vicki marched down the hall and snapped to attention at Screech's side. She wore fatigues as well, the difference being that her boots were so brightly shined, Lisa could have used them as a mirror to check her lipstick.

"Morning, soldier," Vicki greeted.

"Morning, corporal," Screech answered, saluting.

"Present cheek," she ordered.

Screech angled his jaw to the side. Vicki planted a quick kiss on it.

Lisa closed her eyes and put her hand over them to block out the sight.

"What are you doing at Bayside, Vicki?" Jessie asked.

"Reconnaissance," Vicki said. "Since I couldn't be in my own classes, the commander at the academy assigned me the mission of observing classes at a civilian school and writing a detailed report on the experience when I return."

"Hey, great idea," Jessie murmured. "So you'll be

trailing Slater through his classes today, huh?"

"Not A. C. No," Vicki answered. "Although that was the original plan, I just came from making a different arrangement at your commandant's office."

"You mean Mr. Belding? We call him a principal," Jessie said.

"Of course." Vicki pulled a notebook from her shirt pocket and made a note of her mistake.

"So, who will you be shadowing today, if it isn't Slater?" Kelly asked.

Vicki smiled softly. "Why, my Apollo, naturally."

While Kelly and Jessie rolled their eyes at each other, Vicki turned to Screech. "I mentioned to Mr. Belding the need to assign you to an ROTC class this week in place of study hall, and he assured me that everything would be arranged, Sam. It's nearly eight hundred hours, so we'd better move out to your first class."

Lisa dropped her hand and blinked her eyes at Screech. When he turned to follow Vicki down the hall, Lisa surprised everyone by grabbing hold of his shirttail.

"Wait one minute, dork," she snapped. "What does she mean you *need* to be in an ROTC class?"

Screech gave her his goofiest-looking smile.

The girls all recognized it as one of pure happiness.

"Oh, that? I need to get in some practice for the obstacle course and hand-to-hand combat exercises before I transfer to the academy," Screech explained.

"Transfer?" Kelly gasped.

"To the academy?" Jessie echoed.

"With Vicki?" Lisa croaked in astonishment.

Screech winked. "Yep, and then it's off to the army. She's going to help me be all that I can be," he told them, then executed a perfect left turn and marched smartly down the hall out of sight.

"He couldn't," Kelly said.

"He wouldn't," Jessie murmured faintly.

"He sure can and will," Lisa insisted. "And you know what that means, don't you?"

When her friends stared at her blankly, Lisa grabbed each of them by the arm and steered them in Screech's wake. "It means we've got to stop him," she said. "And fast!"

Chapter 10

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Zack had just finished heaping pickles on a double cheese tofu burger in the cafeteria when Babs Lindenburg closed in. She slipped into the empty chair next to him and smiled flirtatiously at him.

"Tell me, Zackie," she cooed, walking her fingers flirtatiously up his arm. "Are you still interested in those Paper Moon Dance tickets?"

Zack chomped into his sandwich. "Hmph," he said.

"I only ask because they are in such demand. I know I promised to hold them for you," Babs said.

"Like I promised your sorority all those dates

with Slater," Zack mumbled, his mouth still fairly full.

"Yes, I know," Babs purred. "But you also know Slater wasn't the one *I* was interested in dating. It's always been you, Zackie."

"I thought it was Butch Henderson," Zack said.

"Oh, him? He's nothing but a moron," Babs insisted, even though the whole school knew she'd been dating Butch exclusively for months.

"Maybe," Zack agreed. When it came to mental assets, Butch was pretty well bankrupt. "But if we had more fullbacks like him on the football team, the Bayside Tigers would sweep up the state championship in a flash."

"Who cares about that?" Babs demanded. "I'm talking about wanting a sensitive man, not a bull in a candy shop."

"Er, I think you mean, a bull in a china shop," Zack said.

Babs looked at him blankly. "Why would a bull go into a china shop?" she asked.

"Forget it," Zack suggested. "You were saying something about tickets to the dance. I hope you aren't hinting that you can't hold them as you promised, because if that is the case, I can't guarantee that Slater will be free for even one date with an Alpha Beta Delta, much less a dozen of them."

"Well," Babs murmured, sliding her fingers down

his arm this time. "Some of my sorority sisters think you should be able to make up your mind today rather than tomorrow about the tickets. Ten of them is a lot, and we have a long waiting list of eager students with cash in hand. So, could you tell me yes or no now?"

She started walking her fingers up Zack's arm again but was stopped short when Kelly materialized and closed her hand over Babs's wrist, plucking her fingers away from Zack.

"The answer is no, bimbo," Kelly growled.

Babs's brightly lipsticked mouth formed an affronted *O*.

Kelly ignored her, pushing between the Alpha Beta Delta girl and Zack. "We've got trouble," Kelly told him.

Babs got to her feet. "You certainly do," she said, clearly in a huff. "I'm going to tell the dance committee to release the tickets we've been holding for you, Zack."

"But, Babs—," Zack croaked, starting to get to his feet.

Kelly pushed him back down into his chair. "Fine," she said over her shoulder to Babs. "We don't need them."

"Fine. You won't get them then," Babs snapped and sashayed away, her nose held in the air.

"*Kelly!*" Zack gasped in astonishment. "Do you realize what you just did?"

Kelly tossed her long dark hair over her shoulder. "Got rid of a nuisance," she said.

"Not to mention ten opportunities to see Occupational Haze," Zack said.

"We've got more important things to do than go to some dumb dance," Kelly told him.

"Like what?" Zack demanded, still in shock.

Kelly glanced over her shoulder once more to where Babs now sat with her sorority friends on the opposite side of the room. "I don't know why you were even being polite to her," she said. "We are going steady, if you remember, Zachary Morris."

"I—"

"Why didn't you just shoo her away like you would a fly?"

"Er, my hands were full?" Zack suggested, lifting them to show Kelly that his oversize sandwich was still waiting to be eaten.

"She never noticed you until you were taken, you know," Kelly continued. "Babs is the kind of girl who just wants a boy because another girl is going with him."

Zack put his burger down and wiped his hands before turning to grip Kelly's shoulders. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You just whistled down tickets

for everyone to a dance that we were all dying to attend, just so you could keep Babs Lindenburg away from me?"

"There are other things more important than the Paper Moon Dance," Kelly said, "like—"

Zack cut her off. "You were jealous."

Kelly snorted. "Don't be ridiculous."

"You were a tigress protecting her own," he said.

Kelly frowned. "Zack. Are you feeling all right?" she asked. "You're talking very strangely. All I was doing was—"

"Showing me how much you care for me," Zack murmured. "That was the nicest and most stupid thing you have ever done."

Kelly eyed him carefully. "Most stupid?" she repeated.

Zack hugged her tight. "And nicest," he reminded her. "Although I'm not sure that everyone else will be as appreciative of the sacrifice you made, considering that they are the ones losing out. Maybe if I go after Babs and apologize, tell her you thought she was talking about something other than the Paper Moon tickets . . ."

When he started to get to his feet, Kelly yanked Zack back into his chair.

"Listen, bub," she growled. "If you want me to be your girl, you stay away from that bimbo. And

instead of going on and on about those dumb tickets, listen to what I've been trying to tell you."

"But I have been. You've been telling me, in actions rather than words, that you love me," Zack said.

"Of course I love you, but I love Screech, too, and—"

Zack shook his head to the side and hit the palm of his hand against his ear a couple times. "Sorry. I thought you said you love Screech."

"I do. And so do Jessie and Lisa and—"

Zack sighed deeply. "Why don't we go back to the beginning, when you first arrived? I have a feeling I'm missing a major part of this conversation."

Kelly took a deep breath. "We have to stop Screech," she said. "He's planning on leaving Bayside and transferring to the military academy where Vicki Slater goes to school."

Zack's mouth dropped open.

"Right this very minute he's out with the ROTC guys preparing to run their obstacle course. Apparently he has to be able to do so successfully before the academy will let him in," Kelly continued.

Zack relaxed back in his seat. "Oh, well, then we don't have a problem, do we? There's no way he'll ever pass that requirement."

"Then I have bad news for you," Kelly

announced. "Vicki took him over the course once before the rest of the ROTC guys got there, and he did it perfectly."

This time Zack's eyes nearly bugged out. "*Impossible!*"

"That's what Jessie and Lisa and I thought until we watched Screech hop in and out of those tires, scale a wall, and pull himself hand-over-hand across a mud pit," Kelly said. "Apparently just having Vicki there believing in him is enough to work miracles."

"I'll say," Zack murmured. "He flunked every physical fitness test Coach Sonski gave us in gym class last week."

"See," Kelly said quietly. "There are things more important than expensive dance tickets. Saving Screech is our number-one priority right now."

Zack didn't look quite as convinced. "But what about Occupational Haze?" he asked.

Kelly shrugged her shoulders elegantly. "If I want to hear them, I'll just buy their CD," she said. "So, what should we do to keep Screech at Bayside?"

Her pretty blue eyes glowed with the belief that he could keep their friend from making a mistake. It never crossed Kelly's mind that he might not be able to change Screech's mind, Zack realized. She trusted in him and his abilities as a scammeister.

It was enough to blow any boy's mind.

Zack glanced hastily around the cafeteria, then grabbed Kelly's hand. "Come on," he urged. "I just might need your help."

"Really? Doing what?" Kelly asked, her voice breathless with anticipation now.

"The impossible," Zack said. "Only the impossible."

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Kevin O'Leary grunted as he scooted on elbows and knees through the oleander bushes that lined the ROTC obstacle course, following Zack's lead.

"I still don't know why I couldn't finish the bean sprout surprise before doing this, Morris," Kevin grumbled.

"Shh. They'll hear us. Besides, Kelly's watching over it. As I told you before, we only wanted you to enjoy the casserole to the fullest, Kevin," Zack hissed, burrowing deeper into the jungle of bushes. "Everyone knows that strenuous exercise moments before eating Ms. Meadows's special bean sprout surprise stimulates the taste buds as well as the digestive system."

"It will be cold by the time I get back," Kevin complained, although at a whisper.

"Much better that way," Zack murmured. "Bean sprout surprise is like a fine wine or an expensive cheese. The taste improves with aging."

"How much aging?" Kevin gasped, trying to keep up with the pace Zack set. "I thought you said we'd only be gone a few minutes. Ten tops."

"And any gourmet cook will tell you that ten minutes is the perfect aging period," Zack whispered back. "Shh. We're here."

Kevin huffed to a stop next to Zack. "Where's here?" he asked.

Zack pointed beyond the bushes to where a number of muscle-bound guys in olive green T-shirts and camouflage pants were doing jumping jacks. Screech and Vicki were in the front row. Slater's cousin was keeping up with the regular ROTC students, but Screech, although he was trying to match jump for jump, was out of step with the rest of them and lagging behind.

The sight cheered Zack. Although the girls had all insisted that Screech didn't know what he was doing and needed to be extricated from Vicki's clutches, Zack hadn't been as sure that doing so would be welcomed by his friend. Granted, Screech got in the way sometimes. He had the ability to mess up the most perfect plan, to stumble over his own feet, or to misunderstand what seemed to be the simplest of instructions. But he also was the most loyal of friends and one of the few people who honestly admired Zack, no matter how much trouble he got

into when a scam went wrong. If Screech was really serious about wanting to attend the academy, Zack wasn't going to be the man to mess up his friend's dreams.

But watching Screech try to be as macho as the ROTC guys, Zack knew that if he didn't stop his friend, Screech would be in big trouble if he transferred to the academy and then realized what a mistake doing so had been.

Screech wasn't making the change because he had a deep desire to be a soldier. He was doing it for Vicki. Zack could understand that. He did lots of things for Kelly that he didn't particularly enjoy. Like going to see mushy movies starring Mitch Tobias. But seeing a movie wasn't the same as making a major lifestyle change such as Screech was planning to do.

Zack turned to Kevin. "What's the rarest birdcall you can do?" he whispered.

"Do you mean, one that only I know how to do or the call of a bird that is so rare very few would recognize it?" Kevin hissed back.

"Both," Zack said.

Kevin thought for a moment. "Got it." He put his fingers to his mouth.

"Not yet," Zack cautioned. "I'll tell you when."

Kevin rolled his eyes. "This isn't a call that can be done without some preparation, Morris."

"Not yet," Zack said again. He peered through the branches at the students on the practice field. The first of the green-clad guys had stopped exercising and were preparing to launch themselves at the obstacle course.

Zack waited until Screech had come up to the line before signaling his assistant.

The first time he warbled it, Kevin's birdcall was drowned out by the commander's starter whistle. Undistracted, Screech leaped forward, bouncing his way, one foot at a time, through a path of tires.

"Darn," Zack grumbled under his breath. "Do it again, Kevin."

Kevin contorted his mouth, placed his fingers just so, and blew again.

Screech's head jerked up. He looked toward the sound, missed the placement of his foot in the next tire, and took a dive forward on his nose.

Geared up, Kevin let out another whistle before Zack could stop him.

While Zack hastily gagged Kevin with his hand, Vicki rushed over to help Screech to his feet. Even in deep cover thirty feet away, Zack could hear concern for his friend in her voice.

"Sam! Are you all right?"

Screech didn't look at her. His attention was tuned entirely for the sound of a birdcall.

Just as Zack had hoped he would be.

"Did you hear that?" Screech asked.

"Hear what?" Vicki asked.

"The call of the yellow-breasted purple-tufted California wood rippler. It's very rare," he told her.

"I'm sure it is," Vicki said, humoring him. "But you can't let a bird disrupt your concentration when running the course."

"But the yellow-breasted purple-tufted . . ."

Zack nudged Kevin. "You're work is done here," he said, and glanced at his watch. "If I were you, I'd get back to that bean sprout surprise. It should be aged to perfection just about now."

Kevin hastily scooted his way back out of the rhododendron thicket. Zack waited just long enough to make sure that Screech had abandoned the obstacle course for the day before inching away himself. He only hoped that Kelly and the others would be satisfied when he reported back to them.

If not . . . well, there were usually plenty of ideas floating around in his fertile mind. Zack just hoped that when the time came to take the next step he would pick the most effective one.

Chapter 11

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The gang gathered at the Max after school to plot some more. Heads close together, they leaned over the table whispering urgently at each other.

"Getting Kevin to do those birdcalls was fast thinking," Jessie said.

"Yeah, but did it work?" Lisa asked.

"Yes and no," Zack admitted. "Screech was distracted enough to flub up this time, but I'll bet Vicki will keep him working until he can run the course blindfolded and never miss a step."

Slater groaned. "Boy, is that ever right."

"So what do we do next?" Kelly asked.

They all thought a moment.

"You know," Jessie mused, "I've got a cousin who joined the armed forces straight out of high school and all he ever did after that was whine and complain about how he couldn't wait until his enlistment was up and he could get out into the real world again."

Slater nodded. "Lots of guys feel that way. I've heard the ones in my dad's company say so. Guess being a soldier looks exciting in the movies and commercials, but it isn't really that way at all."

"Well, to hear the ROTC guys talk about their future in uniform, you'd think it was like being in heaven," Lisa said. "I once considered dating one of them, but I got super bored real quick because the guy didn't talk about anything but getting out of school and into the army. Or was it the navy? Maybe it was the air force. Oh, I can't remember."

"Which means we've got to get Screech away from the ROTC guys. They'll just tell him the same kind of stuff that Vicki does," Slater said.

"That should be easier than getting him away from Vicki," Jessie murmured. "I mean, she's become Screech's constant companion!"

"It makes me kind of sick to even see them," Lisa confessed. "I mean, enough already! I love Keith dearly, but I sure couldn't stand to have the guy con-

stantly around. I wouldn't be able to think straight if he was always by my side."

"Oh, I know what you mean," Kelly said. "I appreciate Zack much more when he's not with me."

Zack frowned.

Kelly grinned at him. "It only makes the times we are together more special," she told him.

Slightly mollified, Zack drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "So what we need to do is to get Screech to see there is a down side to being a soldier dude."

"Lots of down sides," Jessie said. "But how do we do that?"

Zack pondered a moment more. "How about by throwing a party?"

The gang stared at him.

"A party?" Lisa repeated. "For whom?"

"Vicki and Screech. Who else?"

"I hope there is more to this than you're letting on, preppie, because I sure don't see how a party will make Screech come to his senses," Slater said.

"Well, there is a bit more to it," Zack admitted. "For instance, we won't be inviting the ROTC guys or anybody from school."

"We won't?" Kelly asked. "Who will we invite?"

"The guys from Major Slater's company who hate being in the army," Zack suggested.

"Ooh! I like the way you think, Zack Morris," Jessie said. "But won't a party be expensive?"

"A little," he admitted, "but we've got the cash to work with, right?"

"We've got the money we earned to buy tickets for the Paper Moon Dance," Slater said, "but not much else."

"Then we can do it," Kelly said, "because Babs has probably already sold our tickets."

Slater scowled at Zack. "I thought you had made a deal with her so we wouldn't lose them."

"I did," Zack said. "Kelly canceled it."

Slater leaned over and kissed Kelly on the cheek.

"What was that for?" Kelly demanded, surprised yet pleased.

"Yeah," Jessie grumbled. "What exactly was that for?"

"For saving me," Slater said. "I heard Gerda Rezeltoff was going to be my first date. Now I don't have to go out with her or any of the other Alpha Beta Delta girls."

"You actually wanted to?" Jessie demanded.

"They are rich," Lisa pointed out. "How many guys do you think will come to the party, Slater?"

"Are you kidding? There isn't a soldier alive who would turn down free food. They'll all come."

"So when do we hold this party?" Kelly asked.

"Time is running out. Vicki will be leaving at the end of the week, and from everything I've overheard her say, she intends to take Screech with her then."

"Well, you know what that means," Zack said.

"What?"

"We have to hold the party tomorrow," he told them.

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Slater had been right. Every soldier he invited to the party showed up. They all wore their camouflage gear and ate as if they hadn't been fed in a week.

Screech fit right in.

Major Slater had been surprised to find his son hosting an impromptu barbecue in the backyard, but since Vicki and the general were enjoying themselves, he didn't bother to interfere. He did, however, confiscate a couple of hot dogs and hamburgers for his own dinner with Slater's mother in the kitchen.

Zack circled the yard, eavesdropping on various conversations. Especially those Screech was near enough to overhear. When he reached the back porch where Slater was standing, Zack snagged a hot dog and stood looking out over the wave of army green as he ate.

"Learn anything of interest?" Slater asked him.

"Yeah," Zack said, swallowing hastily. "Your dad is considered a great guy despite the fact that he's an officer."

"Really?" Slater looked pleased.

"Hey, I don't make these things up," Zack insisted. "I just report 'em."

"What else?"

"They think we should have made more hamburgers and fewer hot dogs. Go figure," Zack mumbled, enjoying another bite of his.

"Yeah, but are they telling horror stories of life in the military?" Slater asked. "That is what we want Screech to hear, isn't it?"

"Well, sure, but—" Zack broke off and handed Slater his hot dog. "Back in a minute," he said, and plunged into the crowd. A moment later he returned, dragging Kelly by the hand.

"But all I was doing was talking to that guy," she insisted.

Zack reclaimed his dog. "Where was I?" he asked Slater.

"Talking about Screech and—excuse me," Slater said, and pushed into the crowd of young servicemen. When he returned he was escorting Jessie. "You don't want to know that guy," he told her.

"Then why did you invite him?" Jessie demanded.

"I thought he'd be the proper influence on

Screech, not because you were still looking for a date," Slater said.

"I am not 'still looking for a date,'" Jessie insisted. "I was—"

"Being hit on," Slater said.

"Well, yes," she admitted, "but—"

"Excuse me," Slater and Zack said in unison. Together they leaped off the porch and dashed into the midst of the party, returning with Lisa seconds later.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Making points with Keith," Zack said.

"You're going with him, remember?" Slater reminded her.

Lisa blushed slightly. "Oh, yeah. Guess I shouldn't have been flirting, huh?"

"Who can help but flirt with these guys?" Kelly asked. "I mean, look at them! Those broad shoulders . . ."

"Those squared jaws," Jessie said.

"Those muscles," Lisa murmured.

The girls all sighed dreamily.

Zack and Slater looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Too bad none of these dudes has tried to hit on Vic," Slater said. "Maybe she'd lose interest in Screech then."

"Yeah," Zack agreed. "But who among them would be brave enough to flirt with her?"

The girls stared at them in surprise. "Lots of guys would," Lisa said.

"Lots of guys have," Kelly insisted.

"The difference is, she's so used to being around men in uniform, she doesn't even see that they are interested in her," Jessie explained. "She treats them like comrades rather than like the gorgeous hunks they are."

Kelly nodded. "It's only Screech she treats differently, and that's because he reacts to her differently."

"And it's all my fault," Lisa said. "When I dressed her up, I created a monster."

"Or else you turned Vicki into Screech's dream girl," Jessie suggested.

Zack finished eating. "Then we just have to uncreate her."

"How?" Kelly asked.

"Er, I'm still working on that," he admitted.

"Well, work faster," Lisa growled. "If Screech leaves Bayside for Vicki, I'll never forgive myself."

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In the very center of the crowd, Screech gazed into Vicki's eyes. He'd never felt happier, he thought. The day she had walked into his life everything had begun to change. He'd no longer been nothing more

than Zack's sidekick, a post he'd held for as long as he could remember. Once it had been exactly what he wanted to be. Oh, he'd always had other friends as well, like the members of the chess club and the computer nerds. But being part of Zack's crowd had given him a special aura among the other geeks, a popularity that Screech doubted he would have enjoyed if he'd been nothing more than just another science whiz kid.

But Vicki changed all that. She made him feel important on his own. She wasn't impressed that he knew Zack or hung out with Slater, two of Bayside's most popular hunks. To Vicki he was a hunk in his own right, able to do anything he set his mind to.

Like becoming a man, a leader of men.

According to Vicki, it was possible to go to college and be in the service at the same time. There was still time for him to apply to West Point, Annapolis, or the Air Force Academy. He'd start life as a lieutenant in any one of the schools. Would be able to go on to a career in the sciences if he wished or even find a job at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Wouldn't his old Bayside classmates be in awe of him then!

But the only person he really wanted to impress was Vicki Slater. He wanted her to love him as much as he loved her. To spend his life with her. Once they

finished college they could marry, and when her enlistment was up, she could retire to rear their children.

Screech smiled happily. Lots of children. Would she mind if they named their first son after Zack? he wondered. Perhaps she would prefer to name him after her cousin Slater. Or her grandfather. Or himself, Screech mused contentedly. Sam Jr. He'd have his mother's curly hair and his father's brains, Screech decided. Their daughters would all be as pretty as Vicki was, of course. How many should they have?

"What do you think about having three boys and four girls?" Screech asked.

Vicki looked at him strangely. "Have them do what?" she asked.

Screech chuckled. "You're such a kidder," he said.

"Now you're teasing me," Vicki said. "Wasn't it great of A. C. to throw this party for us? And to invite the major's enlisted men?"

"Yeah," Screech agreed. "But there are so many of them, I haven't seen any Bayside students."

"You probably just don't recognize them, since everybody's dressed in fatigues," Vicki explained. "It is a theme party, right?"

"Sure looks like it," Screech said.

"Well, this is what it looks like every day at the academy," she told him. "You never have to worry about what to wear because all your clothes look the same. Isn't that great?"

The same stuff every day? Screech thought longingly of his own colorful wardrobe. Well, to be with Vicki, he supposed giving up Hawaiian-print shirts and his favorite chartreuse suspenders was a fair price to pay. He would really miss his purple-and-lime-checked trousers, though, and the high-top sneakers that matched them perfectly.

"I'm so glad I met you, Sam," Vicki murmured.

Thoughts of his wardrobe vanished. "And I'm glad I met you, my apple blossom," Screech said. When he squeezed her hand and she squeezed his back, Screech's heart swelled with pride.

Chapter 12

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"It didn't work, did it?" Slater said. After the servicemen had all returned to the base, he had used taking Lisa and Jessie home as an excuse to escape his own house and the loving looks Screech and Vicki were exchanging. Now the gang, minus Screech, sat nursing milk shakes at the Max.

Lisa groaned deeply. "It not only didn't work, it backfired."

"Who would have thought that a bunch of guys who complain constantly about what they do would suddenly decide to tell everyone within hearing distance that they loved being in the service?" Jessie said.

"I suppose we should have expected it," Zack mumbled. "They were at their commanding officer's home after all."

"But did they have to do it so loudly?" Kelly asked. "I mean, they might have sounded cheerful only when the major was around and grumbled when Screech was."

"You forget. He was never out of Vicki's sight, and it doesn't take a genius to see that she loves military stuff," Slater said. "None of them were about to let Dad's macho niece think they were wimps."

"Macho. Humph!" Lisa sniffed. "She wouldn't be so macho if she had to deal with the happy pumpkins as I do. I'm telling you, that day care is a regular war zone."

"Speaking of macho, does anybody feel like having some macho nacho cheese onion rings?" Slater asked, signaling a waitress. "I don't know about you guys, but failure makes me hungry."

"Just about everything makes you hungry," Jessie said. "I know exactly what you mean, Lisa. I'm counting the days until the regular workers are well enough to return to the Happy Pumpkin Cottage. Even with Flavia's sister, Yvette, helping us now, dealing with all those little kids is driving me nuts."

"Oh, how can you say that?" Kelly demanded. "They are all so cute and full of energy."

"Too full of energy," Lisa murmured under her breath.

Jessie groaned. "I feel as if I've been battered and trampled over by the time I get home. And we're only there a couple of hours! I don't think I could deal with much more."

"Boy, talk about wimps," Kelly said. "I'll bet Vicki wouldn't feel that way."

"Are you kidding!" Slater exclaimed. "She'd never get near a bunch of kids. She hates 'em."

"*Hates?*" Kelly repeated.

"Isn't that kind of harsh?" Jessie asked.

"Or is it just very, very accurate?" Lisa countered.

Slater's order arrived, so he polished off two onion rings covered in melted cheese before answering. The rest of them helped themselves to his food.

"Vicki thinks kids are too disorderly," he explained. "They don't follow rules very well, and they're always getting into things. They're too messy for her. If you hadn't noticed, Vicki likes things very neat."

Kelly frowned slightly. "That's ridiculous. Kids are supposed to be kind of scruffy. It's what makes them so cute."

"Not to Vic it isn't," Slater said. "She likes everything in its place, including people."

"That's terrible!" Kelly cried.

"I think so, too," Slater agreed, "but it's Vic's way of thinking. She has never wanted to have anything to do with kids, and I know she doesn't ever want to be a mom herself."

"How sad," Jessie murmured.

Zack stole another onion ring. "You mean, how great," he corrected.

"Excuse me?" Kelly said, glaring at him.

"This just may be our last chance to stop Screech," Zack said. "He loves children."

"Oh, that's right!" Kelly gasped. "He's wonderful with Billy, and Billy loves him to pieces, too!"

Lisa took a second onion ring and pointed it at Zack. "So you're telling us that we need to have another party, right?"

"What better way to drive a wedge between Screech and Vicki?" Zack asked. "Since we spent the cash we made working on yards to feed the army, you'll have to shell out for a picnic for the little tykes, girls."

"But what about our dresses?" Lisa demanded.

"We aren't going to the dance, remember?" Jessie said. "So we don't really need fancy new dresses, do we?"

"Let me think about this for a while," Lisa urged, hating to give up any new wardrobe addition.

"It's for Screech," Kelly said.

"I said I'm thinking," Lisa hissed, then sighed. "Oh, all right. So when do we have this picnic?"

Zack hooked another onion ring and looked at Slater. "How long until Vicki and the general leave?"

Slater quickly confiscated the last of his onion rings and filled his mouth with them. He held up two fingers in answer to Zack's question.

"That means—"

"I know, I know," Lisa mumbled. "The picnic has to be held tomorrow."

"What great timing," Kelly said. "Tomorrow is our last day working with the happy pumpkins."

Lisa and Jessie both gaped at her.

"Oh, did I forget to tell you?" Kelly asked. "Mrs. Peters called just before I left the house to go to Slater's for the party. She says her regular staff will be back the day after tomorrow."

Lisa and Jessie both signaled the waitress.

"This calls for a celebration of our own," Lisa declared in relief.

"Yes," Jessie told the waitress. "We want another couple of orders of onion rings and five colas." She grinned across at Kelly. "You know, I never knew being laid off from work could feel so good!"

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It was a great day for a picnic. The sun was shining brightly, the air was warm, and a gentle breeze

was blowing off the ocean. Birds were chirping in the trees, but not one, Zack noticed, sounded like a yellow-bellied purple-tufted whatever it was.

To play it safe, he had told Screech only that they were entertaining a bunch of preschoolers, and he had urged his friend to keep the picnic a surprise from Vicki. "You know how females go on about little kids," Zack had said.

Of course, Screech had no idea how Vicki would go on about little kids. Well, Zack admitted, he didn't, either. He just hoped that Slater had been right and that her reaction would be like dumping a bucket of ice-cold water over Screech's head.

Although he was an only child himself, Zack had been hanging around Kelly's house for so long, he was used to being surrounded by kids. He remembered when the youngest Kapowski, Billy, had been born, and he had even enjoyed taking care of him when he was a baby. Of course, Billy didn't remember how careful Zack had been with him back then and had been known to kick him in the shins since.

Zack rubbed his leg as if it still hurt just thinking about that run-in with the three-year-old.

Mrs. Peters, the day care director, had been overjoyed to have the rest of the gang helping her entertain the little pumpkins after school. Especially since they were bringing a picnic with them and were doing all the work for free.

The girls and Zack and Slater made peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and bought some fruit. They thought up yard games to play. Brightly checked tablecloths were spread on the grass. Napkins were tied around small necks and food distributed. The gang was beginning to worry when half of the sandwiches were gone and Screech and Vicki still hadn't put in an appearance. When Screech got out of the car he'd borrowed from his mother, everybody tried to look anywhere but at the new arrivals.

"Wow!" Screech cried. "Isn't this great? I haven't been on a picnic like this in a long time."

Vicki sat in the car staring at the yard where Flavia and Billy were chasing a large brightly colored beach ball across the grass. "There are children here," she said.

Screech pulled the car door open for her and gallantly offered her his arm. "Yeah, isn't it great? I love playing with kids, don't you? I mean, they are so cute."

Vicki continued to sit in the car. "You go ahead, Sam," she said. "I'll wait for you here."

Screech grinned at her. "You don't have to be shy. Slater and the rest of the gang are here, too, and you know them."

"I'm not being shy," Vicki insisted. "I just don't care to play with children, that's all."

"It's fun," Screech said. "Much easier than doing the obstacle course."

"You go ahead," Vicki urged.

"But you'll miss the picnic," Screech told her.

"I don't mind. In fact," Vicki looked off down the street, "we're only a couple miles from A. C.'s house. I'll just walk home and see you later. You will be all packed and ready to go on Saturday, won't you? The academy is very strict about being AWOL." When Screech looked at her blankly, Vicki explained. "That means 'absent without leave.'"

"I know that," Screech said.

Vicki climbed out of the car. "Have fun with your friends," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Screech shook his head sadly. "No, I don't think so," he murmured.

She looked at him. "Why not?"

With a forlorn look on his usually mobile face, Screech sighed. "I love kids," he said.

Vicki looked uncomfortable. "Well, I have to confess, I don't," she said. "But it doesn't make any difference, Sam. In the army we don't have to deal with little kids, just . . ." Vicki stared down at her boots. "It matters a lot to you, doesn't it, Sam."

"Uh-huh."

"I thought we had a future together," Vicki whispered, "but I guess not."

"I guess not," Screech said. "I'm sorry."

She touched his arm. "No, I'm sorry, Sam. I'll never forget you, you know."

"I won't forget you, either," Screech murmured. "Kiss me good-bye?"

Vicki nodded and squared her shoulders. "Present cheek, soldier," she ordered.

Screech leaned toward her.

"Have a good life," Vicki said, and brushed her lips along his cheekbone.

"You, too," he said.

Unaware that the gang had stopped pretending not to watch and were staring at him, Screech stood on the street and looked after Vicki until she was out of sight.

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Lisa dropped down on the grass next to Jessie and Kelly. "I feel kind of awful, you know," she said.

The other girls nodded. "Were we being selfish in breaking up Screech's romance?" Jessie wondered aloud.

"We were doing what we thought was best for him," Kelly said. "Weren't we?"

"Yeah. But was it what Screech thought was best for him?" Lisa added.

"We'll probably never know," Kelly told her. "Look at him. Those kids have been jumping all over him, and he's loving every minute of it."

"I really don't think he would have been happy at the academy," Jessie said. "He may be sad for a while, but in the end, Screech will thank us for what we did."

Lisa stared at her in shock. "We aren't actually going to tell him, are we?"

"Well, no," Jessie agreed. "But you know what I mean."

Kelly sighed deeply. "So, now that we aren't going to the Paper Moon Dance to see Occupational Haze, what should we do tomorrow night?"

Zack and Slater joined the girls, stretching out next to them. "How about if we go listen to Occupational Haze?" Zack suggested.

"Listen?"

"Sure," Slater said. "You have to pay to *see* them, but if the gym windows are open—"

"Which they will be," Zack promised.

"—we can have another picnic outside and enjoy the concert."

"Maybe even dance on the grass," Zack said. "With the stars above us, that should be pretty romantic."

"Very romantic," Lisa agreed. "But won't it be awfully sad for Screech? I mean, he just lost Vicki."

"I don't think so," Slater said. "Look at him."

Everybody looked. The little pumpkins were gathered around Screech, giggling as he made faces for them. But so was Flavia's older sister, Yvette. As the gang watched, Screech glanced at her and smiled. Yvette smiled back.

"I think he'll be okay," Zack said.

The rest of the gang agreed with him. Wholeheartedly.

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